

ODCSPER RETIREMENT SERVICES OFFICE: ARMY ECHOES  
**Issue 3, Sept 1999**

**COLA Set for December**

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The cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to retired pay and Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities will be 2.4 percent. The COLA will be effective Dec. 1, 1999 and payable in the January check. If you retired before Jan. 1, 1999, your COLA will be 2.4 percent. If you retired after Jan. 1, 1999, your COLA will be less than 2.4 percent. If you first became a member on or after Aug. 1986, you will get the COLA minus 1 percent. Contact your Retirement Services Officer (RSO) for exact figures.

**How DoD Authorization Act Affects You**

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The FY 2000 DoD Authorization Act, signed by the President Oct. 5, 1999, has many provisions which affect or are of interest to retirees and families. We report on some of them in this issue and will report on other provisions in future issues as details become available. Following are some highlights:

1. **Medical Care**

- **Sec 701** - Directs DoD to establish a **pharmacy benefit** program including uniformed services facilities, retail pharmacies (those eligible under TRICARE) and a National Mail Order Pharmacy (NMOP).
- **Sec 702** - Continues providing **chiropractic care** in military facilities for FY 2000. DoD must file a final report by Jan. 31, 2000. If DoD recommends that chiropractic care be offered in military facilities or included under TRICARE, then DoD must submit such a plan to Congress by Mar. 31, 2000.
- **Sec 703** - Continues providing **domiciliary and custodial care** to CHAMPUS beneficiaries if they would be excluded under other provisions.
- **Sec 704** - Provides for improvements in the **Retiree Dental Plan** which could include diagnostic services, preventive services, endodontics and other basic restorative services, surgical services, and emergency services. (Note - The language on improvements leaves latitude on what changes will be made.)
- **Sec 707** - Authorizes an **Open Enrollment Demonstration Program for TRICARE Prime**. This program would allow beneficiaries to enroll in TRICARE Prime at any time. The program, to run from Oct. 1, 1999 to Sept. 30, 2001, will cover DoD-selected designated providers and their service areas.
- **Sec 712** - **Reduces** the requirements for **pre-authorization** of care under TRICARE; reduces the requirement for pre-authorization for preventive services in certain cases; and reduces the requirement for statements of non-availability of services. DoD is to report by Mar. 31, 2000 on these initiatives.
- **Sec 713** - Requires implementation of a system for **improved processing of TRICARE claims** no later than six months after date of enactment.
- **Sec 714** - Authorizes the granting of waivers to certain family members of the TRICARE deductibles.
- **Sec 715** - Requires the establishment of a TRICARE **beneficiary counseling** and assistance coordinators program. Each lead agency would designate a person as full-time beneficiary counselor and assistance coordinator. The commander of each military medical treatment facility will designate a person with a primary or collateral duty in the same type of program. Implementation date is Jan.15, 2000.

- **Sec 716** - Provides for improvements in the **TRICARE Management and the third-party payer collection program**. Permits DoD to reimburse health care providers at rates higher than the reimbursement rates when it has been determined that the higher rate is necessary in order to ensure the availability of an adequate number of qualified health care providers. Also improves the ability of military medical facilities to collect from third-party payers (private insurance companies).
  - **Sec 717** - Requires that DoD submit to Congress a report on the comparison of health care coverage under TRICARE and that available under the **Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP)** by Mar. 31, 2000.
  - **Sec 722** - Requires that health care contracts awarded by DoD provide the **best value** to the US and furnish high-quality health care to beneficiaries.
  - **Sec 723** - Provides for the establishment of a DoD program to improve and **enhance health care quality information** and technology.
  - **Sec 725** - Provides that DoD will, to the maximum extent possible, provide **stability** in health care programs.
  - **Sec 726** - Requires a DoD study for **increased joint operations** in their health care program.
  - **Sec 728** - States that Congress believes that anyone enrolled in TRICARE Prime, living where the **Medicare Subvention** demonstration is in progress, be automatically authorized to enroll in the demonstration.
2. **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**
- **Sec 558** - Requires a study and report on VA use of **National Guard** facilities to provide veterans' services.
  - **Sec 724** - Provides for **DoD** and VA to carry out a **joint demonstration** project to evaluate the feasibility and practicability of using telecommunications to provide health care and pharmacy services.
3. **Survivor Benefit Plan**
- **Sec 654** - Provides credit toward **paid-up SBP premiums** for those retirees who elect SBP coverage under the current SBP **open enrollment period** and have paid the total of their buy-in costs.
  - **Sec 655** - Provides for **paid-up coverage** for those retirees still enrolled in the **Retired Serviceman's Family Protection Plan (RSFPP)**. (*Note: The effective date of paid-up coverage is Oct. 1, 2008.*)
  - **Sec 656** - Provides permanent authority for the payments of **Annuities for Certain Military Surviving Spouses (ACMSS)** to qualified applicants. It also extends annuities to **surviving spouses of qualified reserve members** who 1) had completed 20 qualifying years of service; and 2) died before Oct. 1, 1978. Annuities to these surviving spouses are retroactive to Oct. 1, 1999. (*see pg. 7*)
4. **Funeral support/burial**
- **Sec 381** - Authorizes the **Secretary of Army to lend or donate excess M-1 rifles** (not more than 15), slings and cartridge belts to eligible organizations for use by those organizations at funeral ceremonies of members former members of the armed forces. These M-1s with necessary accompanying equipment and blank ammunition will be loaned or donated and delivered without charge to the organization.
  - **Sec 578** - Changes the composition of **funeral honor details** from not less than three persons to two or more persons; two must be military members, one must be a member of the service of the deceased. This section also changes the name of these details from honor guard detail to funeral honors detail. As a minimum, the funeral honors will consist of folding and presenting the flag to the family and playing of Taps. Also provides that Reserve and National Guard personnel may be ordered to active duty (with their consent) to perform funeral honors duties. This will permit the crediting of such time toward retirement. (**Note: Requests for honors should be made by the funeral director.**)

- **Sec 2881** - Transfers about **36 acres** from the Navy Annex to **Arlington National Cemetery**.
  - **Sec 2882** - Transfers about **eight acres** from Fort Myer to **Arlington National Cemetery**.
5. **Retired Pay**
- **Sec 658** - Provides for **special compensation to certain severely disabled uniformed services retirees** without a reduction in their retired pay. Effective Oct. 1, 1999, non-disability retirees with a VA service-connected total disability rating will receive \$300 per month. Non-disability retirees with a 90 percent VA-service-connected disability rating will receive \$200 per month. Non-disability retirees with an 80 or 70 percent service-connected disability rating will receive \$100 per month. This special compensation is tax taxable income. To be eligible, retirees must not be retired for disability; must have 20 or more years of creditable service; must still be on the retired rolls; must have been rated 70 percent or more disabled by the VA within four years of retirement and must currently have that disability rating. First payments are expected to be made Feb. 1, 2000.
  - **Sec 651 - Repeals** the reduction in retired pay directed by Sec 5532, Title 5 US Code ( the **Dual Compensation** law) effective Oct. 1, 1999.
  - **Sec 641 through 644 - Amends the REDUX retired pay system**, which applies to those armed forces members, who first entered military service on or after Aug. 1, 1986. (Note - Basically these sections allow a service member an option of changing to the retirement system in effect between Sept. 8, 1980 and July 31, 1986, known as "High 3", or remaining under the REDUX system and accepting a \$30,000 lump-sum bonus upon completion of 15 years service and signing an agreement to remain on active duty to complete 20 years of service. Section 643 makes conforming amendments to their SBP.)
6. **Awards and decorations**
- **Sec 563** - Requires the allocation of funds and other resources to eliminate the current **backlog** of requests for issue or **replacement of military decorations**. Also requires a report within 45 days of enactment of this provision on the status of the backlog elimination.
7. **Retiree Councils**
- **Sec 507** - Exempts members of the Army, Navy and Air Force Retiree Councils from the limit on the number of retirees that can be recalled to active duty.
8. **The Armed Forces Retirement Home**
- **Sec 304** - Authorizes **\$68,295,000 from the Armed Forces Retirement Home Trust Fund** for the operation of the US Soldiers' and Airmen's Home and the Naval Home for FY2000.
  - **Sec 383 - Preserves four historic buildings** and grounds at the **US Soldiers' and Airmen's Home**. It also allows for the application to the Secretary of the Interior for grants to maintain, repair and preserve these buildings and grounds.
  - **Sec 384** - Clarifies the land conveyance authority of the **sale or lease of certain grounds at the US Soldiers' and Airmen's Home**. It allows the Armed Forces Retirement Home Board (AFRHB) to determine the manner, terms, and conditions for the sale or lease of property. Any lease shall include the option to buy. There is a stipulation that before conveying the property for sale or lease, the AFRHB shall provide the Catholic University of America an opportunity to match or exceed the highest bona fide offer.
9. **Commissary**
- **Sec 305** - Authorizes the Secretary of the Army to transfer **\$346,154,00** to the Defense Working Capital Funds for **funding operations of the Defense Commissary Agency**. (Note - Each Service Secretary is authorized to transfer a certain amount of money. Total is \$1,009,119,000.)
10. **AER/USO**

- **Sec 311** - Authorizes **\$23,000,000** be made available to the American Red Cross to fund the Armed Forces Emergency Services.
  - **Sec 314** - Authorizes grants to the USO Spirit of Hope Endowment Fund totaling \$25,000,000. **(Note - These matching funds and grants won't be paid until the USO certifies that sufficient funds have been raised from non-federal sources).**
11. **Troops to Teachers**
- **Sec 1701 through 1709** - Authorizes a "Troops-to-Teachers" program to assist eligible members of the Armed Forces to obtain certification as elementary or secondary school teachers or as vocational or technical teachers after separation or retirement.

## **Highlights From Headquarters**

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We have just completed participating in the annual Association of the United States Army Convention; representing Army retirees and family members at the Air Force Retiree Conference and working as subject matter experts at the Army Family Action Planning Conference. Also, my Deputy, Max Beilke, has been actively involved in various Recruiting Command Family Symposiums. All of these forums, designed to identify the key quality of life issues important to our military community, provide us opportunities to highlight to the Army and DoD leadership our retired community's concerns and those we feel they must address. Medical issues remain the highest priority need. The leadership knows that. Lack of sufficient funding to adequately address all the previously made promises is the issue, not the Army leadership's desire to address them. Our leaders know the issues. They're working hard, in a resource restricted environment, to prioritize and adequately address as many issues as possible. They know the effect that "broken promises" have on our ability to recruit and retain good people. I recommend you take the time to read our articles on the DoD Authorization Act and see how Congress has finally addressed some items and how some of these legislative changes may impact on you. Most of these changes reflect years of hard work by our Military Retiree Councils, the Army family groups, and our Military Associations that work on legislative changes. Legislative change in today's world is an even slower process because so many of our legislators have limited military experience. All members of our retired community need to utilize every opportunity to help educate our elected officials on retiree issues and promises made to those who, when they were needed, gave the best years of their lives in the service of this nation. Stay or get involved. We need your help.

An article on page 15 welcomes a new Co-chairman to our Chief of Staff, Army Retiree Council. LTG (Ret.) John A. Dubia joins SMA (Ret.) Richard A. Kidd as Co-chairmen of our Chief of Staff, Army Retiree Council. LTG Dubia replaces LTG (Ret.) Ellis D. Parker who served as co-chairmen for six years. LTG Parker devoted countless hours to pursuing retiree issues and speaking to and meeting with retiree organizations, Congressional, military and community leaders. Service on the CSA Retiree Council is voluntary duty. We abused LTG Parker's good graces by asking him to perform more duty than he needed or deserved but he always did so without hesitation! Retirees, active duty soldiers and family members are indebted to him for his unselfish dedication and willingness to continue to serve America's Army. My thanks to LTG Parker and all the other great soldiers, retirees and family members "Still Serving" who make our Army the best in the world.

Thanks for your support,

**Gary F. Smith**  
**Chief, Army Retirement Services**

**Attention Soldiers with 19+ Years, Retirement Is Coming**

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If you're an active duty soldier who just started receiving *Army Echoes*, don't panic, the Army is not trying to get rid of you. We are trying to send *Echoes* to all soldiers with 19+ years of active duty to help you prepare for retirement, whenever you decide to make that move. Reading *Echoes* and visiting your Retirement Services Officer (RSO) can help you and your family prepare for one of the biggest transitions in your life, from active duty to retirement.

The computer tape used to mail *Echoes* to soldiers with 19+ years is drawn from your personnel file. Home addresses are maintained for officers and unit addresses for NCOs. If you know anyone with 19+ years of service who isn't getting *Echoes*, suggest they visit the RSO to get a copy and visit their personnel office to check their address. We're also looking into using DEERS as the source of our addresses, so make sure your address is up-to-date with them.

### **Cold War Certificates**

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Because of the high volume of requests, there is a six-month waiting period for the Cold War certificate. Veterans and federal government civilians who served from Sept. 2, 1945 to Dec. 26, 1991 are eligible for this Certificate of Recognition signed by the Secretary of Defense. If you wish to apply, submit a copy (not the original) of any official government or military document with the recipient's name, Social Security number/military service number, foreign service number and dates of Cold War service to: Cold War Recognition; 4035 Ridge Top Rd; Ste 400; Fairfax, VA 22030; FAX (703) 275-6749; email (for questions) [coldwar@fairfax-emh1.army.mil](mailto:coldwar@fairfax-emh1.army.mil); help desk (703) 275-6279; homepage: <http://coldwar.army.mil>.

### **DNA Tests May Help ID Korean War Remains**

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**WASHINGTON (AFP)** — Advances in forensic medicine may help DoD identify some of the 846 sets of Korean War remains buried as "unknowns" in the "Punch Bowl" National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. Investigators will use the same mitochondrial DNA technology that proved the remains of Air Force 1LT Michael J. Blassie were those interred in the Vietnam crypt of the Tomb of the Unknowns.

A new DoD policy authorizes the Army's Honolulu-based Central Identification Laboratory to disinter remains of unknown service members that "we believe, with the help of DNA, we can identify," Allen Liotta, deputy director, Office of POW/Missing Personnel Affairs in Arlington, VA, said.

"We're carefully reviewing the cases, looking to see which ones there was a lot of information on but just shy of being able to make an identification," Liotta said. He said the laboratory believes it has compelling evidence on about a dozen sets of remains and will disinter them. There are no plans at this time to open all 846 graves in the Punch Bowl.

Each of the services has a program to locate as many families as possible to obtain DNA samples. Liotta said mitochondrial DNA comes from the maternal side of the family, therefore, DNA samples are needed from the mother, siblings or the mother's family.

POW/MIA spokesman Larry Greer said the identification laboratory uses DNA on about 45 percent of their cases from all wars. The other 55 percent are identified through traditional forensic means, such as dental X-rays.

In addition to the outreach programs for Korean War families, Greer said, the department also seeks family members of the 78,000 servicemen missing from World War II and the 123 lost in

Cold War incidents. He said the POW/MIA office needs information and documents that could aid in identifying remains, such as photographs, military records and letters. Veterans who may have information about burial sites, POW camps and other details are also being sought.

For more information, contact the casualty office of the nearest military installation or the POW/Missing Personnel Office at:

**DPMO-WASH, D.C.**

**Attn: PMKOR**

1745 Jefferson Davis Highway  
Crystal Square 4, Suite 800  
Arlington, VA 22202

The POW/Missing Personnel Office web site lists all Korean War and Vietnam War MIAs and information related to accounting efforts worldwide. The address is [www.dtic.mil/dpmo](http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo).

Toll free numbers for the services' and State Department casualty offices are:

- **Air Force:** 1-800-531-5501
- **Army:** 1-800-892-2490
- **Marine Corps:** 1-800- 847-1597
- **Navy:** 1-800- 443-9298
- **State Department:** (202) 647-6769

**Korean War Commemorative Events for 2000**

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Following are events planned for the first year of the three year commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. For more information or to find out how to get involved, visit the homepage at <http://korea50.army.mil>; or write to: DoD, 50 Anniversary of the Korean War Commemoration Committee; 1213 Jefferson Davis Hwy, Ste 702; Arlington VA 22202-4303, or call (703) 604-0831.

<b>List of Events</b>		
<b>Event</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
National Memorial Day concert	Washington, DC	<b>29 May</b>
Memorial Day Breakfast/Wreath Laying	Arlington National Cemetery	<b>30 May</b>
50th Anniversary Commemoration/Conference	University of Pittsburgh	<b>23 &amp; 24 June</b>
Hostilities Commence (National)	Washington, DC	<b>25 June</b>
Hostilities Commence (International)	Seoul, South Korea	<b>25 June</b>
Korean Service Women's Commemorative Event	Arlington National Cemetery	<b>25 June</b>
Task Force Smith	Suwon, South Korea	<b>5 July</b>
Task Force Smith	Arlington National Cemetery	<b>7 July</b>
Korean War Veterans Memorial Ceremony	Korean War Memorial	<b>27 July</b>
40th ID Korean War Memorial Dedication	Vanderberg AFB, CA	<b>1 September</b>
Breakout of Pusan Perimeter	Taegu, South Korea	<b>13 September</b>
Inchon Landing	Norfolk, VA/Inchon, South Korea	<b>15-17 September</b>
Defense of/Breakout of Pusan Perimeter	Washington, DC/Pusan, South Korea	<b>15-17 September</b>
Changjin (Chosin) Reservoir	Washington, DC/Demilitarized Zone, South Korea	<b>27 November</b>
Nations Parade	New York City	<b>11 November</b>
Evacuation of Hungman	Navy Memorial, Washington, DC/Pusan, South Korea	<b>12 December</b>

### **AER Offers Help to College Students**

Army Emergency Relief (AER) has educational financial assistance available for dependent children of retirees. This includes students contemplating enrollment, those already pursuing undergraduate post secondary or vocational studies and those planning to attend these programs after high school graduation in 2000. In academic year (AY) 1999-2000, AER assisted 1,057 children of retirees with \$1,098,000 in scholarships ranging from \$600 to \$1700. Awards are provided annually for up to four years of undergraduate study.

The MG James Ursano Scholarship Fund administered by AER is for students who study at an undergraduate, technical or vocational institution accredited by the Department of Education and approved for Title IV funds and preparation for the service academies. Students applying for the 2000-2001 AY may not have reached their 22d birthday by Jun. 1, 2000 and must be unmarried dependent children of active duty or retired soldiers or soldiers who died while on active duty or in a retired status. All soldiers and students must be registered in the Defense Eligibility Enrollment Reporting System (DEERS).

Applications for the AER scholarship program, 2000-2001 AY are available by mail from AER HQ until Feb. 18, 2000 or through AER's website at: <http://www.aerhq.org> until March 1, 2000. Completed applications with supporting documents must be postmarked not later than March 1, 2000 for the 2000-2001 AY. Applications and supporting documents are not accepted by FAX or e-mail. Applicants will be notified by letter after June 1, 2000 whether or not they have been awarded a scholarship.

To obtain an application by mail, write to Army Emergency Relief, Education Department (RTD), 200 Stovall Street, Alexandria, VA 22332-0600. Include the retiree's and dependent child's names and retiree's pay grade and mention if the retiree is deceased.

### **Who Can Be Advanced on the Retired List**

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Certain Army retirees who are retired with fewer than 30 years of active service may be advanced on the retired list to the highest grade in which they served satisfactorily on active duty (Sect. 3964, Title 10, US Code). This applies to warrant officers, enlisted members of the Regular Army, and reserve enlisted members of the Army who, at the time of retirement, were serving on active duty or full-time National Guard duty. These individuals can apply when their active service plus service on the retired list totals 30 years.

The Army Grade Determination Review Board (AGDRB), made up of three field grade officers, makes final determinations on the highest grade served on active duty satisfactorily. If you qualify under Title 10 and feel you served satisfactorily in a higher grade than the grade at which you retired, complete DD Form 149, Application for Correction of Military Record, and mail it to: Army Review Boards Agency Support Division; ATTN: SFMR-RBR-SL; 9700 Page Ave., St. Louis; MO 63132-5200. They will attach your military records to your request, and forward your case to the Army Review Boards Agency in Arlington, Virginia. There, the AGDRB will convene and determine the highest grade in which you served satisfactorily. Since you may not appear before the board, you should attach any relevant documents to your application.

If the AGDRB decides to advance you on the retired list, your resulting increase in retired pay will be retroactive to the date you became eligible (i.e., the 30-Year mark). You can get a copy of DD Form 149 on the internet at: <http://arba.army.pentagon.mil>. If you don't have internet access, you may contact any of the organizations which have been approved by DoD to provide assistance to veterans submitting applications such as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Reserve Officers Association, or any veterans affairs office.

**HOWEVER:** For those who served in and retired from the Reserve Component, Army Regulation 135-180 authorizes the Army Reserve Personnel Command to make final determinations on the highest grade served when misconduct is not an issue. If you fall in this category, you should write to Commander; Army Reserve Personnel Command; ATTN: ARPC-PSP-T; 1 Reserve Way; St. Louis, MO 63132-5200. Your letter should explain the circumstances surrounding your promotions, what grade you retired at, and the highest grade that you held as well as your full name, social security number and service number, if applicable.

## 'Forgotten Widow' Law Change Affects Some Reserve Surviving Spouses

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Surviving spouses of Reserve members who died anytime before October 1, 1978 have been added to those eligible for Annuities for Certain Military Surviving Spouses (ACMSS).

The FY 98 DoD Authorization Act created a benefit for so-called 'forgotten widows'. 'Forgotten Widows' was the category of surviving spouses who were previously ineligible for a survivor annuity because their retirement-qualified spouses died before having the opportunity to enroll them in either the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP), created in 1972, or the Reserve Component Survivor Benefit Plan (RC-SBP), created in 1978. Creating the ACMSS benefit remedied that situation; however, the military services went back to Congress to correct one inequity.

Under the FY 98 DoD Authorization Act, the reserve member's death had to have occurred between September 21, 1972 and October 1, 1978, thereby disqualifying surviving spouses of reserve members who died before 1972.

Under the FY 2000 DoD Authorization Act, the criteria for ACMSS qualification now is that the deceased reserve member:

1. must have completed at least 20 qualifying years of service toward retirement, and
2. must have been married to the applicant on date of death, and
3. must have died before October 1, 1978.

Criteria for regular retirees' surviving spouses remains "must have died before Mar. 21, 1974".

The Army has notified applicants disapproved under previous law of this law change. They must reapply and provide supporting documents. Anyone who meets this new criteria is encouraged to apply. If the applicant is approved under this law, monthly annuities (\$174.76 beginning December 1, 1999) are retroactive to October 1, 1999. Retirement Services Officers (RSOs) can be contacted for applications and assistance (see listing on pages 9 and 10). The application indicates what documents must be provided and where to send them. If you know of any surviving spouses who may be eligible for this benefit, please share this information with them.

### **SBP Open Enrollment Ends February 29, 2000**

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**Reminder:** If you are thinking of enrolling in the Survivor Benefit Plan, increasing your base amount or adding Supplemental SBP, you need to contact your Retirement Services Officer now to calculate your SBP premiums and your one-time, lump sum enrollment premium so you can make your open enrollment decision. (See page 9 for RSO listing.)

### **Terminating SBP**

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If your retired pay started after May 16, 1996, you have a one-year opportunity to terminate Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) coverage between the 25th and 36th month following commencement of your retired pay. You must have spouse concurrence with a notary or Retirement Services Officer (RSO) witness. You will be barred from enrolling in the future and you will receive no refund of past premiums. (If your retired pay started before May 16, 1996, your opportunity to disenroll came during the open disenrollment period from May 17, 1998 to May 16, 1999.)

## **Keep Your Retired Pay Records Current**

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Too often, we hear about survivors who have been denied Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) benefits because the retiree failed to update retired pay records when the retiree married, divorced, remarried, was widowed or gained a child. We hear from spouses who did not receive the retired pay for the portion of the last month the retiree was alive because this money went to someone else whom the soldier had elected at retirement.

We hear from former spouses who lost SBP because neither they nor the retiree notified the Defense Finance and Accounting Service within a year of the divorce that SBP was part of the divorce.

To make sure your spouse (or former spouse) is prepared, keep a file of information that your spouse (or former spouse) will need when you die. Make sure your spouse (or former spouse) knows what benefits to expect or not to expect. Clip this article to the outside of your files as a reminder to keep your retired pay records current when your status changes.

## **Commissaries Accept Most Credit Cards**

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**FT LEE, VA** – Most commissaries now accept American Express as well as Discover, MasterCard, Visa and many debit cards.

The holdup on American Express acceptance was not at the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), which runs 293 military grocery stores worldwide. Many customers had requested it.

"Quite simply," Greg Kochuba, DeCA's credit card project manager, said "the Treasury Department would not approve the use of American Express because of the company's high fees. Now that they've agreed with Treasury to lower their fees, we can take just about anything but Diner's Club in the commissaries."

Kochuba says commissaries are selling groceries purchased with credit/debit cards at the rate of 1.1 million transactions a month. That translates to about \$75 million per month in sales. About 20 percent of DeCA's sales are now credit/debit, he said, and that figure is likely to increase with American Express coming online.

The installation of DeCA's new cash registers, which feature rapid scanning and credit/debit, has been an ongoing project for the last two years. In most cases, the commissaries that don't have the new system are stores on installations scheduled for closure, or stores that are being upgraded extensively or replaced with new construction.

## **NEXCARDS Accepted By AAFES**

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**DALLAS** – Because of the conversion of the Navy Exchange Command's (NEXCOM's) NEX-CARD program from Citibank to the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES), NEXCARD customers can use their cards in all AAFES facilities, as well as NEX-COM stores and exchange catalogs. AAFES and NEXCOM are working together on changes that will permit the acceptance of Deferred Payment Plan (DPP) cards in Navy stores.

The conversion is a preparatory step to introducing a single "all exchange" credit card program with a new design logo that can be used in all exchange stores regardless of service. With the

conversion, AAFES now administers the exchange credit card programs for all the military service exchanges.

For NEXCOM customers, there will be no need to re-issue a card, nor will there be any interruption of service. Those customers who may have questions about the conversion may contact the AAFES Headquarters Customer Service Center at 1-800-826-1317.

### **AAFES Has New Way To Check Checks**

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**DALLAS** – Each year AAFES loses millions of dollars through bad checks -- more than \$56 million in 1998 alone. While much of this was collected later, a substantial amount was eventually written off as uncollectable. This loss reduces the amount given back to military and families in Morale, Welfare and Recreation funds.

To help reduce this cost, AAFES has incorporated a check verification system (CVS) against its Corporate Customer Database (CCD) as part of its check authorization procedure. The CCD is a collection of authorized sponsor and family member data from the military Defense Eligibility Enrollment Reporting System (DEERS), the AAFES Personnel Management Information System, and the personnel systems of the Navy Exchange and the Marine Corps Exchange. In the past, this database was used for special mailings.

Here's how the system works:

- A customer presents a check and ID at the register/cash cage.
- The customer's Social Security Number is verified and entered in the register/video display terminal (vdt).
- The register/vdt automatically checks CVS and CCD in order to validate the check transaction.

In those instances where the customer is not in the AAFES CCD, the customer may be asked to use another form of payment and/or to supply information necessary for researching and/or adding customer data to the CCD.

### **Commissary Visitor Policy**

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Under a new policy, authorized commissary patrons may be accompanied by visitors when shopping; however, only an authorized patron can make a purchase. Anyone seeking to make a purchase must be identified as an authorized patron at the point of purchase (cash register). Installation commanders can make exceptions to the customer identification policy for security reasons in which case DeCA will provide identification checks at the commissary entrance.

### **Army MWR, Contractor Offer Vacation Club**

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Retirees are eligible for a special Armed Forces Vacation Club program offered by Army Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) and Resort Condominiums International (RCI). Although RCI is a time-share company, the Army's agreement with RCI stipulates that there is no obligation for users of the Armed Forces Vacation Club voucher program to attend a time share sales meeting.

Under this program, retired military and other DoD personnel call a toll-free telephone number to contact the RCI central reservation center and book a seven-night stay at one of the participating

resorts on a space-available basis for \$209. The resorts are located near popular destinations around the U.S., including Branson, Orlando, Myrtle Beach, Hilton Head, and many other locations. Internationally, RCI resorts are located in Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Scotland, Hungary and many other locations.

More information is available from MWR tickets and tours (ITR/ITT) offices on military installations throughout the U.S., including Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. Most ITR/ITT offices have a directory with information about the features of each of the resorts such as golf courses, restaurants, and horseback riding.

You can also learn more about the Armed Forces Vacation Club space available voucher program by visiting the Army leisure travel web site at [www.armymwr.com](http://www.armymwr.com) where you'll find tips for booking reservations, a list of some of the resorts with best availability and the amenities they offer, a directory of installation travel offices and the toll-free number and account number for making reservations.

When you call the 800 number to make a reservation, you must pay with a credit card at that time. You will receive a confirmation in the mail identifying the resort, dates, and the category of condominium you have booked, i.e., studio, one or two bedroom. Be prepared to provide proof of DoD affiliation.

The program was tested for six months at 12 locations in the National Capital area before being expanded throughout the DoD. Positive response from users prompted RCI to extend the program to December 31, 2001.

### **Retired, Annuity Pay Ssystems Y2K Rready**

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Testing of the Defense Retiree and Annuity Pay Systems (DRAS) to validate the systems are ready for Y2K has been accomplished. Officials of the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) said testing ensured that the agency will provide timely and accurate accounting and finance services for all its customers.

Testing efforts have addressed critical data interfaces between internal DFAS information systems and other government agencies and services. DFAS has tested its electronic fund transfer capability and its interface with the Federal Reserve Bank including the banks and financial institutions associated with it. DFAS has instituted plans for backup power and communications. If a bank is unable to accept transactions via the electronic fund transfer system, DFAS can get the money there by check.

DFAS is working with its business partners, including the military services, the Department of the Treasury and the Federal Reserve Bank, to develop strategies covering a wide range of scenarios to ensure DFAS is able to carry on its mission.

### **Military Health System Completes Y2K Testing**

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**WASHINGTON (AFPS)** — All systems were "go" during a worldwide check of Military Health System computers that track patient care, patient administration and medical logistics. The successful testing validated preparations DoD and service medical departments have made for the Y2K computer date rollover. Testing will continue, however, and as Jan. 1, 2000, draws near, DoD and the services will stay on top of the complex system to ensure it keeps working.

During the three months of testing that ended Sept. 30, technicians set system dates forward to Y2K. Then system users simulated transactions for each of the key health system functions. The simulations included enrolling patients in TRICARE, checking beneficiary eligibility, accessing computerized medical information, verifying immunizations and processing patient claims.

A Year 2000 situation awareness team with representatives from DoD Health Affairs, the TRICARE Management Activity and the service medical departments managed the testing and will monitor the entire health system, at least through the end of March 2000.

### **DoD Prescribes New Pharmacy Benefit**

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**WASHINGTON (AFPS)** — Rising costs and concerns for patient safety and health have led DoD to redesign its pharmacy system.

"There was a concern that we develop consistency across-the-board in our pharmacy programs," Mary Gerwin, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Program Integration and senior adviser to the defense health chief, said. For example, if patients get their prescriptions filled at military treatment facilities or by mail order, it costs the system less because DoD has access to federal ceiling prices with the drug manufacturers, Gerwin said. "Whereas, if beneficiaries get their drugs at the retail level, it could cost the military health system 24 percent to 70 percent more for the exact same drugs."

The problem is further compounded by the lack of standard, system-wide drug availability or formularies. "A drug available at one military treatment facility isn't necessarily carried at another one", she said.

"We've asked Congress for a uniform formulary. These are 'preferred drugs.' Let's say you've got a medication for heart disease, and several drugs provide the same benefits. We want all our pharmacies to carry at least one of those preferred drugs."

Even a preferred drug could lose its effectiveness or cause harm if it interacts with another medication. Since the information systems that control military pharmacies don't directly communicate, patients may get prescription drugs from multiple sources that could cause health risks when they interact.

Gerwin said, "...the new computer system provides a database that consolidates information from different points of service and targets those drug interactions."

For patient convenience and to reduce DoD program costs, the new system encourages use of DoD's mail order pharmacy instead of retail pharmacies. Although current use of the mail order system is below 10 percent, Gerwin said patients who do get their drugs through the mail like it. She added that DoD is able to obtain drugs at the Federal Ceiling Pricing for prescriptions filled via NMOP. National Mail Order Pharmacy details are available at TRICARE Service Centers, military treatment facilities and on the TRICARE Web site at: (<http://www.tricare.osd.mil/>).

Beneficiary cost has played a significant role in redesigning the pharmacy system. "We want to make sure this doesn't end up with additional out-of-pocket costs to beneficiaries," Gerwin said. "Although there are co-pays for use of the mail order pharmacy (\$8 for retirees), prescriptions are and will continue to be filled free of charge at military treatment facilities."

Included in the redesigned benefit is a pilot program for Medicare-eligible beneficiaries over the age of 65. (see article below).

DoD modeled the new pharmacy design on the best business practices of private sector health plans.

### **DoD Pharmacy For Medicare-Eligibles Set For 2000**

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A pharmacy benefit pilot study for Medicare-eligible DoD beneficiaries over age 65 will take place in the counties of Fleming, KY, and Okeechobee, FL. The sites were selected by random drawing by members of the Military Coalition and Alliance. Services are expected to begin in the spring of 2000. The study was directed by the Fiscal Year 1999 DoD Authorization Act.

The pilot program will make network retail and mail order pharmacy benefits available to DoD beneficiaries in the demonstration areas who are Medicare-eligible, age 65 and older, and who have Medicare Part B.

To be eligible for the program, potential enrollees must live in designated ZIP codes in and around these counties.

The benefit for those eligible will be equivalent to the TRICARE Extra pharmacy benefit with a \$250 enrollment fee plus the applicable co-payments. The co-payments are 20 percent for up to a 30-day supply of medication from a TRI-CARE Retail Network Pharmacy or \$8 for up to a 90-day supply of medication from the National Mail Order Pharmacy Program.

Both network retail and mail order prescription services will be available in the pilot program. Beneficiaries may choose to continue their use of Military Treatment Facility pharmacies. The pilot benefit incorporates no financial limit on drug purchases.

Enrollment is expected to begin in spring of the year 2000. DoD Medicare-eligible beneficiaries, age 65 and older may call their TRICARE Service Center to find out if their ZIP code falls within the jurisdiction of the pilot program. Eligible beneficiaries in the designated ZIP codes may enroll. ZIP code information is also available on the TRICARE web site at: <http://www.tricare.osd.mil>. For more information, TRICARE representatives for the Okeechobee, FL, area can be reached at (800) 444-5445; and for the Fleming, KY, area at (800) 941-4501. Customer service representatives will let callers know when they may start enrolling in the program.

The study sites were selected based on two criteria set in the DoD Authorization Act. First, the two sites had to be non-catchment areas - these are areas lacking a military treatment facility (MTF). Second, one site had to have a high presence of health maintenance organizations (HMOs), and the other a low presence of HMOs. Some HMOs offer a pharmacy benefit to Medicare-eligible enrollees, and by taking into account their presence in the site selection, the DoD can study relationships between private HMO benefits and the pilot DoD pharmacy benefit.

"The pharmacy benefit pilot program is one of several programs being tested by DoD across the country to expand health care access for military retirees," Dr. Sue Bailey, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, said. "This new pharmacy demonstration program helps solve the problem of high out-of-pocket healthcare costs for our age-65-and-older beneficiaries who do not have access to a MTF and who do not have a prescription benefit through other health insurance. For our retirees in these pilot areas, prescriptions will finally be affordable under this program."

### **FEHBP Test About To Start**

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Up to 66,000 Medicare-eligible retirees age 65 and older and their family members had the opportunity to enroll in the Federal Employee Health Program (FEHBP) from Nov. 8 to Dec. 13 as part of a special three-year demonstration scheduled to begin Jan. 1, 2000 and run to Dec. 21, 2002.

The test is limited to ZIP codes around the following test sites: Dover AFB, DE; Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; Ft Knox, KY; Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point, NC; Dallas, TX; Humboldt County Area, CA; Naval Hospital, Camp Pendleton, CA and New Orleans, LA.

Retirees taking part in the test will receive their health care through and pay premiums for one of the plans in FEHBP DoD demonstration project. Retirees and family members taking part in this test may not use Military Health Care facilities and may not use military pharmacy services while the test is going on. Retirees and family members taking part in the test have been placed in a separate risk group so their premiums are not the same as for other FEHBP enrollees. Of course, premiums vary among the plans taking part in the test.

### **DoD Seeks Gulf War Sanitation Vets**

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**WASHINGTON** — DoD wants to interview Gulf War veterans who served as field sanitation team members and may know about potential health hazards service members were exposed to before and during the war. Investigators have found it difficult to identify soldiers who worked on the teams because field sanitation is normally performed as an additional duty. They're requesting that Gulf War veterans who worked on the teams call the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses, toll free, at (800) 497-6261 to report their observations.

### **TRICARE Senior Supplement Demonstration**

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DoD will test making payments for beneficiaries receiving Medicare benefits while enrolled in the TRICARE Program as a supplement to Medicare. The TRI- CARE Senior Supplement Demonstration Program will run from Spring of 2000 to Dec. 31, 2002.

Each eligible beneficiary who enrolls in TRICARE under the TRICARE Senior Supplement Demonstration Program will pay an enrollment fee. An eligible beneficiary is a member or former member of the Uniformed Services, a dependent of a member or former member of the Uniformed Services, or a dependent of a member of the Uniformed Services who died while on active duty for a period of more than 30 days, who meets the following requirements: (a) is 65 years of age or older; (b) is entitled to hospital insurance benefits under Medicare Part A; (c) is enrolled in the supplemental medical insurance program under Medicare Part B; and (d) who resides in a demonstration program area.

The demonstration areas includes ZIP codes in the Cherokee, TX, and Santa Clara, CA, areas.

### **VA Health Care Enrollment Includes 'Priority Group 7' Veterans**

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**WASHINGTON, DC.** — VA medical facilities are enrolling all honorably-discharged veterans who seek VA health care during the fiscal year (FY) that began Oct. 1, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo West, Jr., announced.

The VA Secretary's announcement ensures continued treatment next year for "Priority Group 7" veterans, the lowest in a seven-group listing of veterans that began in 1998 under a nationwide

VA enrollment system. "Priority Group 7" veterans do not have service-connected disabilities or they are rated as "non-compensable and zero-percent" for service-connected disabilities.

"It is my intention to serve as many veterans as possible under the law and give them access to the full range of services they need," West said.

West's decision assures veterans in all priority groups are eligible to enroll during FY 2000. VA officials still recommend that veterans retain private health insurance, since it may cover services such as emergency care that VA does not usually provide.

The VA's enrollment program was established by the Veterans Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996. It requires most veterans to enroll to receive health care at VA medical facilities. Veterans can apply at any time.

Veterans who fall into the following groups are not required to enroll:

- Veterans with a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more;
- Veterans seeking care for a service-connected disability;
- Veterans discharged from military service less than one year for a disability that was determined to have been incurred or aggravated in the line of duty, but that VA has not yet rated.

While not required, these exempted veterans are still encouraged to enroll so VA can plan more effectively to meet their health-care needs.

Under the enrollment program, VA offers an expanded array of health-care services, such as preventive care; primary care; inpatient and outpatient services; rehabilitation; mental health; substance abuse treatment; home health, respite and hospice care; and drugs and pharmaceuticals in conjunction with VA treatment.

Veterans can use these VA services even if they have Medicare, Medicaid, DoD or private health insurance coverage.

To apply for enrollment, veterans can call, write or visit their nearest VA health care facility. Most facilities have designated special enrollment coordinators to assist veterans and their families, and to answer any questions they may have. Information is also available by calling 1-877-222-VETS (1-877-222-8387).

### **SGLI Changes Help Beneficiaries**

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**WASHINGTON (AFPS)** — Recent changes to the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) program should ease the burden on beneficiaries immediately following a servicemember's death. These changes also affect the Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI) program offered to retiring and separating service members as a continuation of the SGLI benefit.

Now, benefits are immediately placed into interest-bearing checking accounts and beneficiaries are given a checkbook. In the past, lump-sum checks were mailed to beneficiaries.

"This is important because it relieves the immediacy on the part of the beneficiary to find something to do with that money," Navy Capt. Elliott Bloxom said. "It gives the beneficiary, during their time of grief, the opportunity to have that money available, but if they don't use it right away, it gathers interest for them."

Bloxom, DoD's director of compensation, said that in another change that began in October, when a covered member dies, the beneficiary will be offered free financial counseling for up to a year.

### **VA's Newest National Cemetery**

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**WASHINGTON, DC** — The 117th VA national cemetery, Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, in Elwood, IL, south of Joliet, has been dedicated. More than one million veterans in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana live within 75 miles of the site. Presently, the nearest VA national cemeteries are in Danville, 95 miles south of the cemetery; and Rock Island, 135 miles to the west. Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery will provide more than 400,000 burial spaces once the 982-acre site is fully developed.

### **Short Shots**

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*(Note: Publications, organizations and events that may be of interest to retirees appear in this section as a service to retirees. This doesn't imply that Army Echoes endorses these publications or programs. Any problems should be directed to the specific publisher or organization.)*

- The 17th Annual National Retired Military Golf Classic will be held in Myrtle Beach, SC, from May 31 to June 5, 2000. The Classic will be played on five courses at Myrtle Beach National and Myrtlewood Golf Clubs. Only 864 men and 132 women will be accepted for the event. Applications were mailed in December 1999 to those on the mailing list. Applications will also be available at most US military golf clubs. Priority will be given those who have played in the Classic. After Feb. 1, 2000, acceptance will be on a first-come, first-served basis. A waiting list will be established once the Classic is full. For applications, call 1-800-845-0633 or write to: National Retired Military Golf Classic; PO Box 3608; Myrtle Beach, SC 29578.
- Military Living Publications has recently published, "European U.S. Military Road Atlas Plus Near East Areas," "The United States Military Road Atlas," and the "U.S. Military Installation Road Map." These publications are available at military exchanges; through the Military Living homepage (<http://www.militaryliving.com>) or through the mail by writing to or calling: P.O. Box 2347; Falls Church, VA 22042-0347; (703) 237-0203; FAX (703) 237-2233.
- The Society of Military Travelers is a club for military retirees and their dependent family members. Membership costs \$25 a year which includes monthly mailings and discounts. For more information, call 1-800-638-8784 or (703) 914-1966, write to The Society of Military Travelers; PO Box 2116; Arlington, VA 22202; **E-Mail:** [thesociety@pipeline.com](mailto:thesociety@pipeline.com), **Website:** <http://www.militarytravelers.com>.
- There have been several recent changes to the active duty uniform. Does that affect you as a retiree? No. According to AR 670-1, retired soldiers not on active duty may wear either the uniform reflecting their grade and branch on the date of their retirement or the uniform for soldiers in the Active Army of corresponding grade and branch, when appropriate.

### **New Retiree Council Co-Chair**

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Retired LTG John A. Dubia is the new co-chairman of the Army Chief of Staff's (CSA) Retiree Council. He succeeds retired LTG Ellis D. Parker who served the council for six years. LTG Dubia's last active duty assignment was serving as Director of the Army Staff. Retired SMA Richard Kidd continues to serve as co-chairman of the council.

The CSA Retiree Council represents Army retirees and family members. The council meets once a year to review retiree issues forwarded by installation retiree councils and decide which of those issues need to be addressed by the CSA. The next council meeting is scheduled for April 2000.

**Armed Forces Retirement Homes**  
***Special places for special people***

The U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, DC, and the Naval Home in Gulfport, MS, are retirement communities that meet the needs of retired servicemembers and other eligible veterans. The Homes offer health care, room and board, activities and the camaraderie of other retirees and veterans. For information, call 1-800-422-9988 (the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home) or 1-800-332-3527 (the Naval Home) or visit their home page at: <http://www.afrh.com>.

**Retiree Appreciation Days**

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Following are Retiree Appreciation Days (RADS) hosted by Army Retirement Services Officers (RSOs). For information, call or email the host of the RAD (see pages 9 and 10 for listing). RADS are a great opportunity to gather with other retirees and gather information.

## UPCOMING RADs

ARMY INSTALLATION	DATE
Vicenza, Italy	March 25
Everett, WA (425) 304-3775 (Navy)	May 20
Ft Monroe	March 23
West Point	May 6
Ft Lewis, WA	August 11
Selfridge ANGB, MI*	August 26
Ft McCoy, WI*	September 8
Ft Sill, OK	September 14-16
Ft Eustis, VA	September 16
Duluth, MN*	September 21
USAREUR, Heidelberg	September 22
Twin Cities, MN*	September 22-23
Fort Lee, VA	September 23
Ft Leonard Wood, MO	September 29-30
Ft Meade, MD	September 29-30
Ft Monmouth, NJ	October 21
Ft Benning, GA	November 2-3
Quad Cities Area, IL/IA*	November 4

\* Sponsored by Ft McCoy

**Correction:** In Issue 1, we should have given the phone number of the Orlando Florida Military Retired Activities Office as (407) 646-5775.

### AAFES Launches Special Retiree Program

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**DALLAS** — AAFES has introduced the Still Serving Program to inform retirees about expanded services and other changes. The program was launched at selected CONUS installations with letters to retirees, coupons, catalogs and an event weekend with specials on retiree-popular items and local store programs such as "meet the manager," health tests and VA and Medicare booths. These installations were: Nellis, Kirtland, Offutt, Barksdale, Dobbins, and Wright-Patterson AFBs, and Forts Gordon, McPherson, Gillem, Bliss, the Presidio of San Francisco, and Carlisle Barracks. More than 167,000 customers were included in the test. AAFES plans a similar expanded event next year.

**Note:** The Cleveland and Denver Centers Will Mail IRS Form 1099-R by January 15, 2000 to Retirees and Annuitants Whose Retired Pay or SBP is Taxable.