Deputy Administrator's Listening Post
August 27, 2008
Minutes

1. **Web T&As**...implementation update...notifications to Unions, etc. (I understand there is a telecon with Labor Relations folks, i.e., Jack Burns, 8/21) Any updates would be appreciated. Also, if the supervisor is absent, what happens then? Can someone else approve it and send on to the timekeeper? Where is the quality control for accurate entry of data on the T&A? Is the timekeeper ultimately responsible for this? What will the access be to the webTA system: individual PIN or other?

Response: The Department scheduled a telecon on August 21 with the Labor Relations staff from all USDA agencies, to discuss future notification of the unions regarding WebTA implementation. Our unions know that WebTA is coming, just through informal interactions and communications with Jack Burns. It's not a secret that the Department has been reviewing options for a new T&A system for about the last 2 years. Jack will officially notify our unions soon.

On Tuesday August 19, we received official notification from the Department that the REE agencies will implement WebTA in the second "wave" of implementation, which is scheduled for November 18 (pay period 23). This is our "go live" date.

To get ready for implementation, Ted Nykiel and staff have been working with the Area points of contact to effect T&A corrections in the system; some of you may be involved in working on these corrections. The fewer number of errors we have, the easier the implementation will be.

Other preparation in anticipation of the "go live" date is to provide training to all timekeepers, employees, and supervisors. The company from which WebTA was purchased has developed on-line training modules, which Ted and staff are reviewing to see if they are user friendly – Ted and staff will supplement this training if need be, to ensure this part of implementation goes smoothly. The following link is provided for frequently asked questions: http://www.usda.gov/da/webTA/faqs.htm

Initial implementation will be for timekeeper entry (as we do now) just to get the system up. We will quickly move to employee entry of their T&A info, and supervisory approval of the T&A, all done electronically. Ted and his staff, the HRD Director's Office, and the Employee Relations Branch has been using employee entry of their T&A for several months as a sort of pilot test, and they report it was easy to learn and has proved to be a timesaver for the timekeepers.

Supervisors can assign their own back-up(s) within the system or retract that authority when no longer needed. Rather than giving and retracting the authority each time the supervisor is absent, I suggest that a back-up or two be assigned more or less permanently as you never know when they might be needed.

With regard to quality control, the employee has foremost responsibility for the accuracy of their own T&A. The supervisor, based on their knowledge of the employee's comings and goings and leave requests has a monitoring responsibility. If the timekeeper is entering the T&A information (as they will be initially), they have a responsibility for accurately entering the T&A data from the timesheet into the T&A program. Once employee entry commences, the timekeeper will be monitoring the employee entries for proper transaction codes and leave regulatory compliance.

The access to webTA will be via the E-authentication user ID and password.

2. **HSPD-12 update**.....any updates on long term planning for employees that come on board after roll-out period? Where will employees who registered for their LincPass at a mobile enrollment center? What about non-Federal people?

Response: The focus of the Department is on current employees in the National Capital Region, mission-critical facilities, and laptop users. There is also a strategy employing mobile and fixed enrollment stations in the field. Beyond that there is no real long-term plan for new employees coming on board after the initial rollout. It is reasonable to expect that some fixed or shared stations in the field will continue in operation; and there will probably be another circuit of mobile deployments to capture employees (including new hires) who did not get enrolled in the first wave.

The current plan for delivery of LincPasses to employees who enrolled at mobile enrollment stations is as follows:

1. Cards are currently being held in Ft. Collins, USDA Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO).
2. All cards will be activated in Ft. Collins.
3. Cards will be distributed to the regional points of contact (POC's).
4. Employees will receive an activation e-mail with a temporary PIN number.
5. Employees will pick up their cards from the regional POC's which will be verified by a facial verification.
6. Employee will need to sign into a system (to be identified by the USDA OCIO), put in the temporary PIN and create a new PIN. The card will not work until a new PIN has been created.

We will keep you posted as information becomes available and confirms the above process.

Please be advised that HSPD-12 activities are continuously evolving as new issues arise and new solutions are developed. The goals, however, remain the same – all employees will have the LincPass, and it will be used to access information systems and those facilities that use an electronic access system. Please note that there is no strategy established yet for non-Federal people. Periodic HSPD-12 Implementation Updates are provided to the Deputy Area Directors by the REE HSPD-12 Team.

3. **CATS/US Bank Systems Training**: Would be nice if CATS and US Bank would roll out at the same time for training.

   Response: We appreciate the thought. Regarding CATS, we have asked each Area Office to develop their own implementation schedule and have CATS implemented within the first quarter of FY 09. This allows each Area the maximum flexibility to implement the CATS system. U.S. Bank is a little different scenario, driven by the Department and the fact we are changing Bank vendors and will have a different audience. It will involve those within procurement, property and travel and not just the CATS users. However, we do appreciate the concern regarding combining training whenever possible to save time and effort for all involved.

4. **CATS Deployment**: Did the implementation team factor in the number of cardholders that would be accessing the database? Concerned about overloading the system.

   Response: Yes, the new CATS will have a dedicated server to handle the volume of users.

5. **New Purchase card updates**. Is it possible to have new cards mailed to AO/Purchasing Agent/LAPC; and, after appropriate training on new system, folks would receive their new card?

   Response: Access Online is U.S. Bank's online system for establishing and managing card accounts, (i.e., account set up and maintenance, reconciliation, and oversight). Training for purchase card users (cardholders and approving officials) will cover the online system and USDA policy. Both Access Online training and USDA policy training will be Web-based. Existing cardholders and approving officials will be required to take the mandatory training by a given date to continue to utilize the card. This training is expected to be available during the October/November timeframe.

   According to the contract terms with U.S. Bank, cards will be delivered to the cardholder addresses that have been transmitted to U.S. Bank. Cardholder data will be transferred from Bank of America database to U.S. Bank. Existing cardholders will receive their cards to continue to support their mission requirements. These cardholders, including their approving officials, will be given a timeframe to have training completed by a certain date. New cardholders and their approving officials will follow the training process defined in the upcoming Departmental guidance.

6. **AFMnet Update:**

   Response: After the excellent round of focus groups (which elicited a great deal of valuable information), the consultant provided a final report with many exciting recommendations.   The next step will be to proceed with design and development of the actual site incorporating the recommendations from the report. Among those recommendations are:

- allowing users to add, share, and edit content pages
- simplifying the nomenclature and navigation
- allowing information to be Location or Area-specific
- creating an agency-wide calendar
- creating a unified date-reporting platform (a dashboard)

These are just a few of the creative and innovative recommendations – many of which were suggested during the focus group sessions with AO's and functional experts. We want this to be an AFM web portal for doing business in a secure environment; i.e., an "intranet."

7. **FY-09 Budget**: Any other FY 09 "heads up" IT, Budget, etc.?

Response: All indications are that we will be under a Continuing Resolution for FY-09 equal to the current services budget plus some a prorata share of pay cost funds (based on 2.9% requested in the FY-09 President's Budget). However, current information indicates that the pay cost rate will be 3.9% plus the respective locality pay adjustment which will impact the overall pay cost rate; for example, in the Washington DC Metro Area the pay cost rate will be 4.4%.

8. **Travel – foreign Visa applications**: At present, HQ sends hard copy visa applications to the Area FATA's, who then forward copies to locations. You never know for sure if you have the latest version. Suggest that the current versions (and any applicable instructions) be loaded to Sharepoint, with access granted to location personnel to download as travel needs arise.

Response: This is a very good suggestion and we will look into this possibility. We will look to see which applications can be downloaded locally and which application need an original to complete. There are some applications that the Foreign Agricultural Service completes with information we provide. The Travel and Relocation Services Branch, FMD, will investigate the possibilities for this.

9. **Utilities Billing and Payment Issues**:

- New NFC procedure requiring utility invoices to be sent directly to St. Louis P.O. Box. We weren't notified of this change.

- Would like to have the option to receive statements locally, and then submit for payment after we've reviewed. Seeing these bills allows allocation of costs when collocated in facilities with other agencies. Are sometimes charged by the utility company for duplicate copies of bills.

- NFC not paying correct amounts (including past due); sometimes paying all tax on wireless, sometimes some or none; bills not getting paid, then getting paid twice if you resend.

- Suggest that we could include specific payment instructions on the fax cover sheet directing NFC exactly what amount to pay, and that they be instructed not to deviate.

- Can we return to the option for locations to pay (utilities) via credit card?

- Can the TUMS History View Screen be modified to show more than 3 months, and to also include what day the payments were transmitted?

Response: Michelle Garner, FMD, and Brenda Katulski, OCIO, are working with Peggy Javery, NFC regarding our outstanding utility issues and hope to issue new guidance by October. In response to the specific questions raised:

On May 21, 2008, the Agencies were notified that in support of USDA's Lean Six Sigma objective to further automate and streamline invoice processing, the Electronic Administrative Initiative for Telephone and Utility Invoices will be effective June 2, 2008. Utility companies have been instructed to send their invoices directly to St. Louis and the utility bills are now being processed through the Enterprise Content Management System (ECM).

The Controller Operations Division (COD), NFC, has notified USDA telephone and utility vendors of the pending implementation, and vendors have been advised to change the remittance address on all paper invoices. Additionally, COD has issued a memorandum regarding the initiative for telephone invoices to the Telephone Area Mission Control Office (TMACO) and a memorandum regarding the initiative for utility invoices to USDA agencies, requesting that each agency contact its telephone and utility vendors to ensure that all address changes have been made.

We should be getting access to the ECM that will allow us to view a copy of the invoice used for payment. This will allow us to confirm that an invoice has already been submitted and received rather than faxing additional copies of invoices NFC has on hand but has not yet processed. This will also help to ensure that once invoices are received by NFC, they will remain in the que until processed and are not lost or misplaced at NFC. This should improve ARS' ability to address issues with the vendors and NFC. This should also assist those who are co located with other Agencies and have a need to allocate costs. Please note that you should be contacting the vendor to prevent inappropriate tax charges from appearing on your bills.

RE: Fax cover sheet suggestion: This is an option that we are considering and are discussing with NFC as part of our solution.

With regard to using the Purchase Card to pay utility bills, we are still under a USDA mandate that the utility bills not be paid via the government credit card. Payment of telephones and utilities will continue to be paid through the NFC feeder systems.

RE: Request to Modify TUMS: Past attempts to make modifications to some of our older feeder systems have not been successful. These changes, although simple, tend to be costly to implement. We will ensure this recommendation is forwarded to the appropriate group at NFC. However, we hope that granting Agency access to the invoices processed through the Enterprise Content Management System (ECM) in St. Louis might provide an alternate solution to this problem.

10. **New Flexible Work Schedule P&P**: I'd like to see some discussion on how the different concepts vary and work together, along with some examples.

Also - I'd like to review the delegations of authority. As I read it, all of this may be delegated down to the first level supervisor, or could be retained at any level, say the RL level. Can there be different schedules allowed for different positions? For example, could a purchasing agent be allowed a maxi-flex schedule but a secretary who also acts as receptionist be required to work normal business hours.

As I read this, flex-time allows individuals to set different start and quit times, but must always be 8 hours per day.

Glide time allows the start and quit times to vary from day to day within limits.

Credit hours must be earned before used. So I can't work 6 hours one day and 10 the next to make up for it, unless I already have two credit hours earned previously. And I can't start at my usual time, take a long lunch and work late to make up for it, unless I already have credit hours available - so I could actually use and earn the same number of credit hours on the same day. Or, I could use glide time to cover the long lunch time.

Maxi-Flex allows deviation from the 8-hour per day, 5 days per week plan as long as 80 hours per pay period are worked - up to 8 10-hour days per pay period. As with flex-time, this is to be a pre-set schedule of work.

I'm hearing questions on this so I imagine others have questions, too so I thought it would be good to go over the key points.

Response: The following responses are provided in terms of the general policy, but you must always find out from the Area Office as to what particular Area policies and procedures have been established for their respective Locations to follow.

Yes, first line supervisors may be delegated the authority to approve flexible work schedules – again I must say within the requirements set forth by the Area Office and/or the RL. This varies among Areas, so it is important to know how your Area wants this handled.

It's possible to have different schedules for different positions. For example, lab technicians may not have as much flexibility as other positions because of the nature of research and the scheduling of experiments. The receptionist example is another good

example of where flexibility may not be possible – if business hours are 8 – 4:30 and the receptionist desk needs to be covered during that time, then a flexible work schedule would not be approved.

Glide time allows flexibility on either side of the work schedule: arrive earlier or later than the official start time without having to obtain prior approval. ARS has not specified whether this is 15 minutes, 30 minutes, or some other time frame, which allows maximum flexibility. Therefore it is extremely important for the supervisor to explain what the allowable time frame is – whether it's a Location policy or an Area policy – to their employees each year when work schedules are being approved (ARS-331 form). Having said that, if there's an experiment or staff meeting scheduled or some other reason why flexibility is not permitted, then the glide time would not apply.

You are correct in saying that credit time must be earned before used. However, using your example of taking extra time at lunch time, you can take a long lunch and stay later to make up the time since it's all on the same day (it's not considered credit time).

Probably the most important thing about credit time is knowing your Area/Location policy for approving it – some supervisors want to approve all credit time before it is worked, others allow employees to work up to 1 hour per day (or some increment) without prior approval. Some supervisors do not allow earning of credit time at all. Communication to employees as to what the parameters are, prior to any working of credit time, will save a lot of disappointment and consternation of both employees and supervisors.
You are also correct in saying that flextour is an 8 hour per day schedule, in which start and end times may vary. Maxiflex allows for a 5-4-9 schedule, a 4-10 schedule, or any other different schedule, subject to the approval of the person with the delegated responsibility to approve. We use maxiflex schedules in AFM to help address employees' work/life issues, for example.

Again, it is very important to find out the respective Area policies and expectations for administration of flex-time and maxiflex. It is also important for employees to understand that the first obligation is to meet the work requirements, then if it's possible to set up a flexible work schedule around that, it is the supervisor's (or RL's) prerogative. There is no entitlement to a certain flexible work schedule. I do understand that morale can be affected if one office allows a lot of flexibility and another does not – that's why communication from supervisors to employees is so important, if the supervisor cannot approve a schedule as flexible as what the employee has requested.

If you have more questions or want to discuss this P&P further, please contact Ted Nykiel at 301-504-4426 and he or one of his staff can help you. The Pay and Leave Webcast for AO's was conducted this past March, and since we are finally moving forward with WebTA implementation, we probably won't be able to provide that webcast again till next year. But if you continue to have questions about flex-time, please don't hesitate to call the Area Office and/or Ted.

11. Why is **certification as an ADO site-specific**? We have AO's who are assisting at other offices due to a vacancy and can approve RSA's at their own location but not where they are helping out. We were told it's because they don't know the circumstances at other locations, but they probably know them as well as the area agreements person.

Response: The Level 1 ADO certification is site-specific to insure proper use and close oversight from the individual administering the RSA for a specific location. The individual must not only be aware of the goods and services acquired through the RSA but also in a position to be accountable for its proper use. Since, the Area Agreements Specialist/ADO is accountable for all Extramural Agreements awarded in their Area, in the absence of the AO with a proper Delegation of Authority for a specific location, the responsibility to service the RSA defaults to the Area Agreements Specialist/ADO.

12. What is being done to look at **solutions for long-term (budget) problems and how is this being integrated with succession planning**?

Response: There is no set answer. The Area Directors (Ads) continue to be concerned about this. Dr. Betschart and Dave Love, HRD, are now holding conference calls with the each AD regarding SY recruitment and their strategy. After the ARMPs are submitted, the SRMP reviews will be held to discuss those units in poor financial condition and determine how to deal with this. This will also be discussed at the September Administrator's Council (AC). Unfortunately, we will continue to struggle with this until we receive an infusion of additional funds in our appropriation.

13. How **proposed location closings** are handled: When a location is proposed to be closed, it has an extreme effect on morale. If it's not your location, it's easy to dismiss it as unlikely to happen. But when it's your job, your home, etc. it's a serious concern. I know that employees have been looking for other employment because of our proposed closing. While good efforts were made to alert employees to the proposed closing and put it in context, there was very little follow-up. Employees need to be communicated with on a regular basis (at least monthly) as to the status of the proposal. Even if it's only to say Congress hasn't acted on it; we expect the ____ Committee to be considering it next month. By communicating with employees it would show some concern and also reduce the uncertainty level.

Response: We agree that communications can be improved and Jim Bradley will carry this message back to the AC.

14. **GovTrip** continues to be a concern.

Response: Unfortunately, this is the system we have to use, we had no choice in the matter, and it would be best to get on with learning the system as best you can and assist each other. You are encouraged to take advantage of the refresher training sessions as they are very valuable and give an opportunity for interaction with those who have found ways to work through difficult situations and make the system work for them. In

response to a comment on duplicate travel advances, FMD is aware of this issue and is checking it out now to find the cause.

15. What is the **follow-up from the Listening Post Teleconferences**? Are there minutes that could be distributed to all AO's? How do you follow up on questions and concerns that are raised?

Response: All minutes of the DA Listening Post are posted on the AFM website within a few days of the teleconference. Answers to questions raised at the teleconference that require follow-up are obtained and included in the minutes.

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