

7 FAM 590 MANAGING A FEDERAL BENEFITS UNIT (FBU)

*(CT:CON-297; 04-24-2009)
(Office of Origin: CA/OCS/PRI)*

7 FAM 591 INTRODUCTION

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

- a. This section outlines the role and responsibilities of the consular officer assigned to manage a FBU. (See 7 FAM 511 through 514).
- b. For “How-to” information that is not specific to managing a FBU, such as workload, space, time, and communications management, see 7 FAH-1.

7 FAM 592 GOALS/MISSION - HOW MAY I HELP YOU?

(TL:CON-80; 06-18-2004)

- a. Provide quality and customer-friendly service to those inquiring about Federal benefits and other Federal agency services, recipients of Federal benefits and claimants;
- b. Accommodate the needs and expectations of your customers;
- c. Ensure integrity of benefit payments; and
- d. Standardize procedures to administer Federal benefits matters efficiently.

7 FAM 593 TYPES OF FEDERAL BENEFITS “OPERATIONS”

7 FAM 593.1 Claims-Taking Posts (CTP)

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

- a. Claims Taking Posts (CTPs) take full Social Security claims and many have or will eventually have, direct Social Security Administration (SSA) connectivity. Guidelines and instructions for Social Security programs are provided by SSA. CTPs stock necessary forms and pamphlets and

provide in-depth assistance to claimants and beneficiaries.

- b. Large consular units, where the SSA beneficiary population is often heavily concentrated, are staffed by Locally Engaged Staff (LES) fully trained in SSA policies and procedures. These FBUs are directly connected to SSA's computer database.
- c. Other smaller units are also staffed by LESs fully trained in SSA policies and procedures, but they do not have SSA connectivity.
- d. Regional Hub FBU's are consular units serving more than one country; they also have SSA connectivity.
- e. The SSA funds six Regional Federal Benefits Officers (RFBOs) who are assigned to major benefits processing posts and one Technical Adviser who is assigned to the VA Regional Office, Manila.
- f. Eventually, the final decision to award or deny benefits and to start payments will be made at posts abroad by RFBOs and those fully trained in SSA policies and procedures rather than by sending the claims received to SSA headquarters thus providing better and faster service to the claimants and beneficiaries.
- g. CTPs also provide services to other agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, but the CTP designation generally relates to SSA work.

7 FAM 593.2 Nonclaims-taking Posts (NCTP)

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

- a. NCTPs simply take a statement (name, address and telephone number of the person, and the fact that the individual wishes to file a claim). This statement is date-stamped by the consular officer to protect the earliest possible filing date and forwarded to the paying agency in the U.S. NCTPs also distribute checks to beneficiaries in their consular district and may be asked to conduct a field investigation for a particular case.
- b. Consular units with no staff fully trained in SSA policies and procedures. (Some in a HUB formation are served by an FBU designated as a Regional HUB. The RFBO provides special instructions for these posts.)

7 FAM 594 RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CONSULAR OFFICER

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

- a. You play a crucial role in ensuring program efficiency and integrity.
- b. Becoming familiar with the different programs and directly involving yourself in the FBU's daily work will assist you in your efforts to manage

the unit efficiently and to address any concerns of accountability.

7 FAM 594.1 Administrative

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

a. Regarding casework consular officer will:

- (1) Regularly review the inventory of pending work and monitor for timely completion and responsiveness;
- (2) Routinely meet with the senior LES to review concerns and problems;
- (3) Keep the RFBO and head of the consular section informed of important developments at post regarding possible fraud and cases or issues attracting or potentially attracting media or congressional attention;
- (4) Invite the RFBO to visit your post periodically;
- (5) Ask the RFBO how best to audit LESs' performance of the paying agency's work;
- (6) Periodically review non-form letters and correspondence that senior LES's send to clients over their own signature;
- (7) Periodically observe field investigations; coordinate field investigation procedures with the RFBO;
- (8) Review, understand and enforce medical examination procedures, stress the importance of scheduling them promptly, and check the documentation to be submitted;
- (9) Introduce yourself to panel physicians, know their qualifications and how they were selected;
- (10) Establish new operational changes when agencies initiate new procedures;
- (11) Be familiar with any Totalization Agreement that affects your post;

NOTE: "Totalization agreements" have two main purposes. First, they eliminate dual Social Security taxation, the situation that occurs when a worker from one country works in another country and is required to pay Social Security taxes to both countries on the same earnings. Second, the agreements help fill gaps in benefit protection for workers who have divided their careers between the United States and another country.

- (12) Alert agencies to events (coup d'état, strikes, and earthquakes) that may impact on continuing payments and other activities;

- (13) Implement group sessions and/or other outreach activities for providing information to your clients;
 - (14) Provide answers to the most frequently asked questions on post's website;
 - (15) Seek Department and agency advice when needed;
 - (16) Understand financial/accounting procedures for reimbursement for agency requested field trips;
 - (17) Reimbursement for medical examination costs, travel to and from appointments, and per Diem; and
 - (18) Remind employees to be polite and courteous.
- b. Regarding office management you will:
- (1) Officially transfer FBU management responsibility from one consular officer to another as tours end and begin;
 - (2) Oversee the general control of work; frequently review daily correspondence; and monitor office functions for waste, fraud and mismanagement practices;
 - (3) Institute an employee back-up system by rotating and cross-training your staff not only within the FBU, but in other aspects of consular operations;
 - (4) Know the responsibilities of each member of your staff;
 - (5) Arrange training opportunities for employees;
 - (6) Reward employees individually and/or as a group for outstanding performances or unusual/special services provided;
 - (7) Encourage the RFBO to oversee field investigation procedures;
 - (8) Keep a tickler of regularly scheduled reports;
 - (9) Be aware of commendations, complaints, human resources issues, fraudulent claims activity and other special interest concerns;
 - (10) Establish good intra-office communications by including the senior FSN and RFBO in ACS staff meetings so they become an integral part of the team;
 - (11) Conduct weekly FBU staff meetings to keep employees informed of post happenings generally and issues specific to Federal benefits and consular concerns as well as to solicit suggestions and comments from employees;
 - (12) Initiate time-saving measures and streamline the steps for specific functions whenever possible;
 - (13) Determine whether you can/should out-source processing activities

- that do not have to be performed by government employees;
- (14) Ensure maintenance of records in accordance with Department records management schedules;
 - (15) Conduct regular briefings/training for employees and contractors regarding the release of information pursuant to the Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act; and
 - (16) Ensure that the FBU waiting area is pleasant, with FBU-related brochures and other reading material available.
- c. Regarding office procedures you will:
- (1) Post up-to-date agency contact lists and provide copies to all employees;
 - (2) Maintain adequate supplies and forms, e.g.
 - (a) IRS tax forms;
 - (b) Agency benefits applications and brochure;
 - (c) Change of name/status forms; and
 - (d) Selective Service System registration forms.

NOTE: Most federal agency benefit/services forms are available on the web page of the agency in question are hyperlinked in the relevant subchapters of 7 FAM 500.

- (3) Establish procedures for handling, storing, safeguarding, and distributing Federal benefits checks. (Encourage direct deposit of benefits where possible.)
- (4) Understand the procedure for reimbursements from the Department of the Treasury for fees incurred for check delivery; and
- (5) Be aware that postage for mailing Treasury checks is a reimbursable item on an estimated annual lump-sum basis. Such expenses are charged to the post's salaries and expenses (S&E) program allotment and you should submit relevant charges to the post's financial management officer (FMO).

7 FAM 594.2 Management Controls and Accountability

(TL:CON-80; 06-18-2004)

- a. 7 FAH-1 Chapter 600 provides guidance on management controls, anti-fraud and malfeasance.
- b. Consular officers will:
 - (1) Require employees to keep a record of the time spent on activities

for other agencies.

- (2) Work with the post financial management officer to ensure that FBU's procedures are in accordance with post's standard accounting procedures.
- (3) Ensure that there is tight control and accountability of all overpayment refunds and other payments received for benefits-paying agencies.
- (4) Ensure that access to records is consistent with the provisions of the Privacy Act and the Freedom of Information Act. See CA/OCS Intranet Privacy Act Feature.

7 FAM 594.2-1 Fraud Prevention

(CT:CON-297; 04-24-2009)

- a. The same high standards for proof of identity and validity of documents applicable to U.S. nationality determinations and visa eligibility must also be applied to Federal benefits work.
- b. Consular officers will:
 - (1) Familiarize yourself and your staff with respect to host government-issued documents and vital statistics procedures that are relevant to FBU's activities;
 - (2) Report fraudulent practices to the RFBO, the benefits paying agency, and to the Department;
 - (3) Report suspicious trends (e.g. lost checks); and
 - (4) Monitor the selection of examining physicians to ensure rotation.
- c. Check Handling:
 - (1) Ensure that the receipt/delivery of checks is handled by at least two trained individuals in a secure location. Written procedures should be established and given to employees responsible for this function (see 7 FAM 594.1 c.);
 - (2) Establish procedures and then monitor how the mailroom releases regular monthly checks received in bulk shipments;
 - (3) Review the transient list periodically to be sure the proper procedures are being followed;
 - (4) Checks may not be photocopied in their entirety (only the address in the envelop window may be copied);
 - (5) Checks should not be opened unless they are to be stamped "not negotiable" and returned to Treasury;
 - (6) Any checks held overnight must be kept in a locked safe;

- (7) Also see specific agency sections for procedures for returning and replacing checks; and
- (8) (See 7 FAM 527.)

d. Funds Handling:

- (1) Overpayment Collection – refunds may be made in local or U.S. currency to the post cashier or in accordance with specific post procedures. Cashier will then prepare a receipt for the beneficiary and forward a copy to the FMO;
- (2) Receipts must show:
 - (a) Name of person refunding money;
 - (b) Date and amount of receipt;
 - (c) Social Security number/claim number; and
 - (d) Credited SSA trust fund or agency fund (The post Financial Management Officer (FMO) or Regional Federal Benefits Officer (RFBO) provides appropriation numbers.); and
- (3) The FMO will forward receipts to the Regional Administrative Management Center to credit the appropriate accounts.

7 FAM 595 COMMUNICATIONS

7 FAM 595.1 With Other Agencies

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

- a. You will communicate regularly with your Regional Federal Benefits Officer. Posts having a resident RFBO should meet with them on a regular basis to review program status. Others should invite the RFBO to visit their post whenever possible.
- b. You may access routing indicators for telegraphic communications with other Federal agencies on OpenNet and click on ACP 117. Your Information management officer can provide assistance if necessary.
- c. Maintain good relations with other agency representatives such as Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Customs, etc.

7 FAM 595.2 With Your Clients

(TL:CON-80; 06-18-2004)

- a. In today's electronic world, you should make available as many options as possible to serve your clients expeditiously. There is an up-to-date list of

telephone and FAX numbers, postal, internet and E-mail addresses for each agency as well as the RFBOs in the appropriate sections of 7 FAM 500. Encourage your employees and clients to communicate electronically whenever possible.

b. However, in some instances an in-person interview may still be the best way to communicate with beneficiaries, claimants and/or spouses and dependents.

7 FAM 596 RESOURCES

(CT:CON-198; 10-17-2007)

Consular officers; consult the following resources in addition to 7 FAM and 7 FAH:

- (1) Websites for agencies serviced (hyperlinked in the respective subchapters of 7 FAM 500;
- (2) CA Intranet and Internet web pages;
- (3) CA/OCS/PRI Federal Benefits Liaison Officer at ASKPRI@state.gov or fax 202-736-9111;
- (4) SSA Program Operations Manual System (POMS); and
- (5) Federal agency manuals/handbooks issued at posts.

7 FAM 597 THROUGH 599 UNASSIGNED