

OVERSEAS COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE

OVERVIEW

The Overseas Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) is a non-taxable supplemental pay allowance, designed to offset overseas prices of non-housing goods and services. It affects approximately 230,000 Service members at ~600 locations overseas, including Alaska and Hawaii. Approximately \$1.5 billion is paid in Overseas Cost of Living Allowances annually.

HOW OVERSEAS COLA IS CALCULATED

Overseas COLA is intended to equalize purchasing power so that members can purchase the same level of goods and services overseas as they could if they were stationed in Contiguous United States (CONUS). Overseas COLA is calculated by comparing the prices of goods and services overseas with average prices for equivalent goods and services in CONUS. The result of this price comparison is an index that reflects a cost of living. Members will only receive a COLA if the costs are higher in an overseas location. If prices in CONUS are rising at a greater rate than those overseas, a member's Overseas COLA will decrease, and vice versa. However, if prices rise or fall at the same rate, a member's Overseas COLA will stay the same.

Two surveys determine the relative cost of living overseas compared with CONUS:

- *Living Pattern Survey (LPS)* - asks Service members where (what outlets) they shop and what percentage of goods they purchase locally, at the Commissary/Exchange, and from the internet. Service members can have a direct impact on Overseas COLA indexes by participating in the LPS
- *Retail Price Schedule (RPS or Market Basket Survey)* - annually captures prices approximately 120 goods and services based on outlets identified in the Living Pattern Survey

KEY FACTS

- Overseas COLA is not a fixed amount and may vary for each Service member. Payments are determined by:
 - Location
 - Rank
 - Years of Service
 - Number of Dependents
- Overseas COLA is only based on a Service member's income, not a spouse's
- Overseas COLA fluctuations should be considered in household budgeting; fixed expenses, such as car payments, should be based on what a Service member can afford without Overseas COLA
- Overseas COLA will fluctuate based on the exchange rate and could go up or down from pay period to pay period

Learn more at www.defensetravel.dod.mil/site/cola.cfm

Visit the DTMO website for more information:

- COLA Calculator (Rate Query Tool)
- COLA Indexes
- Pay Tables
- Frequently Asked Questions
- COLA Videos
- Current Living Pattern Survey Information



*Information current as of 3/2016



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