Understanding overseas COLA

Living Pattern Survey to begin in April

By Defense Travel Management Office

Service members can have a direct impact on their overseas Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) indexes by participating in a Living Pattern Survey (LPS). In April, service members overseas will be asked to serve in a critical role by completing the survey. The more households that participate in the surveys, the more accurate the COLA will be.

Overseas COLA is a non-taxable supplemental pay allowance, designed to offset overseas prices of non-housing goods and services. It affects approximately 260,000 members at 600 locations overseas, including Alaska and Hawaii. Approximately $1.8 billion is paid in overseas COLA annually.

Overseas COLA is intended to equalize purchasing power. The prices of goods and services overseas are compared with the prices of equivalent goods and services in the United States. The result of this price comparison is an index that reflects a cost of living. If prices in the continental United States (CONUS) are rising at a greater rate than those overseas, your overseas COLA will decrease, and vice versa. However, if prices rise or fall at the same rate, your overseas COLA will stay the same.

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

• Living Pattern Survey (LPS) - asks service members where they shop (e.g., commissary, Exchange, catalog, Internet) and what percentage of goods they purchase at each of these places. 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 prices approximately 120 goods and services based on information from the LPS.

Before COLA increases or reductions become final, recommendations are reviewed by the Military Advisory Panel (MAP), consisting of a representative from each of the seven uniformed services. When approved by the MAP, these recommendations are forwarded to the principals, a group composed of deputy assistant secretaries and directors representing each of the uniformed services.

Overseas COLA is not a fixed amount and vary for each service member. Adjustments are either immediate or made incrementally, depending on whether the payment will increase or decrease. Increases in COLA are made immediately whereas COLA reductions are phased in to help minimize the impact. Payments are determined by location, rank, years of service and number of family members.

Overseas COLA is only based on a service member's income, not his or her spouse. Overseas COLA fluctuations should be considered in household budgeting and fixed expenses, such as car payments, and 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.

Service members can calculate their COLA rate at http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/perdiem/ocform.html. The calculation tool is updated with the current COLA amounts each pay-period.

The Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO) manages the results of COLA surveys. Comprehensive information about COLA, to include an informational video and frequently asked questions, is located on the DTMO Web site at www.defensetravel.dod.mil.

Military Census: Make your voice heard

By Chief of Naval Personnel Public Affairs

NAVADMIN 001/10, released in January, is the second in a series of military census newsgrams which provide guidance for Sailors to make their voices heard during the 2010 Decennial Census.

Beginning March 15, the Census Bureau will conduct the nation's 23rd decennial census to gather a complete count of the population of the United States to include personnel living on board naval installations and ships with a U.S. homeport.

The decennial census is an in-depth survey used to gain population counts which fuel government decisions on how approximately $400 billion per year of federal funding is spent in your neighborhood on hospitals, schools, senior citizen centers, emergency services and public works projects. In addition, the enumeration determines the number of seats a state occupies in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Sailors will be asked to complete a short military census report containing six questions.

"By participating in the 2010 Census, Sailors of all ranks have an opportunity to help create a better future for those they care about," said Navy Personal Readiness and Community Support Branch Chief Melanie Kinchen, who is responsible for coordinating the census efforts. "I can't imagine any Sailor who wouldn't want to make that difference."

Commander Navy Installations Command is the lead for executing census procedures on board shore installations and Commander U.S. Fleet Forces Command is the lead for afloat commands.

Ship crew members will be required to complete a regular census questionnaire for their shore address as well as a shipboard census report on board the ship. The completion of both forms is required by the federal government.

In addition, military personnel assigned to a group quarters, to include bachelor's quarters, will be counted at the group quarter, even if it is located on a non-naval installation.

Census questionnaires will be delivered by the U.S. Postal Service to all housing units on military installations beginning March 15. If you live off-base, you will receive a census questionnaire at that address.

All commands may obtain information specific to their command by contacting their command's census project manager.

Advanced education funds for senior enlisted Sailors available

By Ed Barker,
NETC Public Affairs

Naval Education and Training Command (NETC) announced funding Feb. 17 and is seeking applicants for the fiscal year (FY) 2010 Advanced Education Voucher (AEV) program, providing advanced education opportunities for top performing chief and senior chief petty officers.

Announced by Naval Administrative Message (NAVADMIN) 053/10 , AEV provides financial assistance to selected senior enlisted personnel (E7-E8) to complete post-secondary, Navy-relevant degrees through off-duty education. Tom Smith, Enlisted Education coordinator at NETC, called the educational program one of the most significant in the military as the Navy invests in the future of enlisted leadership.

"The senior enlisted members accepted into this program will further develop and hone the knowledge and skills necessary to lead our Navy in the future," said Smith. "The AEV program gives them the opportunity to get a degree from a university without having to worry about finances, as it pays for 100 percent of tuition, books and fees up to a specified limit."

The AEV program will fund bachelor's and master's degree completion in designated, Navy-relevant areas of study. Examples include: strategic foreign languages, construction management, emergency and disaster management, homeland defense and security, human resources, business administration, leadership and management, engineering, information technology, nursing, business administration, education and training management, and electrical/electronic technology. All degrees, including any not listed above must be approved by the AEV program coordinator at NETC to validate Navy relevance.

One of the Sailors who recently completed the AEV program is Senior Chief Sonar Technician (Surface) (SW/FMF/IUSS) Larry Holman, Operations Department leading chief petty officer for Commander Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet Navy Data Center in Yokosuka, Japan.

"I think AEV gives chiefs the ability to obtain a degree and use those skills where the Navy needs them the most – on the deckplates," said Holman. "My master's degree is in Human Resource Management; as a chief, that is what we do everyday, on and off duty. My degree gives me additional leadership tools to use to help mold my 21st century Sailors into what our Navy and nation needs, flexible and educated Sailors with the ability to adapt and excel in any environment."

Eligible applicants include E7s with no more than 16 years of time in service, and E8s with no more than 18 years of time in service. Time in service for all pay grades is computed to Oct. 1, 2010. Proven superior performers with continued upward mobility are encouraged to apply.

AEV will support bachelor's degree completion in approved, Navy-relevant areas of study through off-duty education, capped at $6,700 per year for a maximum of 36 months from the date of enrollment and covers 100 percent of tuition, books, and related fees. Total program cost per student is limited to $20,000. Qualified candidates must have an associate degree from an accredited institution or the equivalent amount of college credit applicable to the degree being sought.

The AEV master's degree program covers 100 percent of tuition, books, and related fees up to a maximum of $20,000 per year for up to 24 months of enrollment, with the total program cost per individual capped at $40,000. Qualified candidates must hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution recognized by the Department of Education. For FY-10, Navy-relevant master's degrees are required.

Applicants should be transferring to (or currently on) shore duty with sufficient time ashore to complete their approved degree program. Applicants on sea duty may apply provided they submit an education plan, with commanding officer endorsement, which demonstrates the ability to complete the degree program. Senior enlisted members who have already invested in their professional development by pursuing college education and those who are currently enrolled in a qualifying post-secondary degree program using tuition assistance (TA) or other financial assistance programs are eligible to apply for the AEV program. Reimbursement for any education expenses incurred prior to participation in AEV is not authorized. AEV and TA benefits may not be combined.

Upon completion of, or withdrawal from education for which any authorized expenses were paid, participants shall agree to remain on active duty for a period equal to three times the number of months of education completed or three years, whichever is less. This obligation is discharged concurrently with any other service obligation program participants may have already incurred. The AEV agreement does not obligate the Navy to retain the member on active duty. If a program participant fails to complete the period of active duty specified in the agreement, the Sailor will reimburse the United States for the cost of the advanced education received, prorated for the obligated time served.

Applications should be sent to Naval Education and Training Command (N525), 250 Dallas Street, Pensacola, FL, 32508-5220. See NAVADMIN 053/10 for specific requirements and application guidelines. Packages must be endorsed by the applicant's commanding officer and command master chief.

For more information on the program, call Tom Smith, AEV and Enlisted Learning & Development coordinator (NETC N525) at (850) 452-7271 (DSN 922) or e-mail at thomas.a.smith4@navy.mil.

The AEV program is a supporting element of the Enlisted Learning and Development Strategy, which includes post-secondary education as an integral part of the career roadmap for each rating career track.

Additional information about the AEV program may be viewed on the Navy Knowledge Online (NKO) Web site www.nko.navy.mil. After logging on, click the 'Learning' tab, then go to the quick link for AEV located on the left hand side of the page.