

## **IRS Briefing on the Evacuation Notices and COVID-19 Issues**

**SUMMARY:** Information from our May 11, 2020 briefing with the IRS on the evacuation notices and COVID-19 issues is provided.

Yesterday, we met telephonically with the IRS for our planned meeting. Representatives from Workforce Relations, FMSS and W&I were on the call.

### **Employee Work Status and Operations Update**

We asked the IRS to update us on the progress W&I and SB/SE have made to have volunteers return to perform mission-critical work in various functions at campus and remote call site locations. This week marks the first week of the pay period in which retention incentives will be paid to volunteers in the remote call sites and the second pay period for campus volunteers. W&I indicated that retention incentives are expected to continue to be paid beyond the initial two pay periods. W&I also indicated that it would not be seeking additional positions to include in the request for volunteers for the retention incentives at this time. NTEU had asked that they consider including the tax law specialist positions (TLS). W&I indicated that the TLS is a higher graded position that is more specialized, and their skill set is not required at this time for the work currently underway. W&I reports they have increased the number of telephone lines that are now open. Currently telephone lines are open for BMF, the practitioner priority service, IDT/VA, International and TPP. EPSS continues to work remotely and there are no plans to call them back to the workplace as of this briefing. As capabilities increase, W&I is using a “soft launch” approach and not advertising the opening of additional lines as they do not want to overwhelm the systems. W&I reports that the EIP help line will launch later this week. This line will be staffed with contractors and will only answer questions addressed by the FAQs. Questions involving taxpayer accounts will be referred back to the IRS. In terms of when the IRS may take steps to direct large numbers of employees to return to work, Workforce Relations states that it is still too early as discussions among IRS leadership are still occurring. The IRS indicated that it may have information on that issue next week. FMSS reported that increased levels of cleaning continue in the campus and remote call sites where volunteers have been asked to return. While the additional cleaning is taking place now, procurement is underway to ensure these additional services are included in the contracts going forward. SB/SE was not available for the call. At this time the agency has no updates to report about requiring additional employees to return to the workplace.

### **Requesting FMLA Leave**

We again discussed with the IRS the issue we raised in the previous week about employees having difficulty with the FMLA leave approval process, as FOH is no longer accepting faxes of medical documentation. As such, these medical records can only be transmitted by e-mail; and this process requires medical documentation to be attached using a “zip file” to ensure the privacy of these documents is protected. The IRS now confirms the FOH

website is available on the IRS intranet and is up to date. The website includes a banner which links the user to instructions on how to “zip file” medical information for privacy. We asked the IRS how employees who do not have access to the IRS intranet or a personal computer will be able to submit medical documentation for FMLA requests? The IRS indicated that that page may need to be “public facing” but did not have an immediate answer and will get back to us.

### **Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HoH)**

At NTEU’s request, the IRS has purchased transparent mask or facial shields that will allow a D/HoH employee to be able to both use and communicate facial expressions and mouth words viewable to the other party and for managers, colleagues, and sign language interpreters to use in signing with D/HoH employees. The order is expected to be delivered in mid-June and will be distributed upon request.

We shared with the IRS concerns that hard of hearing employees are receiving training that does not include closed captioning. In response to our inquiry, the IRS stated it is providing sign language interpreting on mandatory briefings. For other types of training, the agency is accommodating D/HoH employees with CART services and sign language interpreters, both through video remote interpreting and on-site as available. Services can be requested via Outlook e-mail to \*RA Form 13661. The Federal Relay Service is another mode of communication with D/HoH employees that the IRS funds and makes widely available to all users.