



# OPEDA NEWSLETTER

Organization of Professional Employees  
of the US Department of Agriculture

## IN THIS ISSUE

President's Message.....	1
Credit Union Recognizes OPEDA as Good Neighbor.....	1
Unsung Hero 2008 Announcement.....	1
Scholarship Awards 2007.....	1
OPEDA Christmas Party.....	2
Short Term Telecommuting Training Module.....	2
Pay for Performance Revisited.....	3
Planning for the 2008 council Meeting.....	3
Bypass Paperwork to Retire?.....	3
Pay Tables at OPM Website.....	4
Federal Pay Issues.....	4
Holiday Party Region 23.....	5
OPEDA Scholarshin.....	5

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### **President's Message Sait Challenges Council to Recruit New Members**

National OPEDA President Farook Sait issued a challenge to the OPEDA Council in December, 2007, to recruit 5 new members by the end of January. The President will obtain an interim report on the success of the Council at the next meeting of the Board of Directors.

In the meantime, President Sait, who also chairs the Board of Directors, has recruited triple the number of members in his original challenge. As of January 11, the OPEDA Membership Secretary, Bruce Marti, reported that the membership rolls were increased by 15 as a result of Farook's efforts.

### **Agricultural Federal Credit Union Recognizes OPEDA as a Good Neighbor**

During the recent upgrading of the Agricultural Federal Credit Union (AFC) facilities in the sub-basement of the South Building, USDA, DC, OPEDA provided office space for two AFCU staff members. The visitors told OPEDA staff members that they enjoyed the fellowship in the office; OPEDA staff and members were pleased to assist the AFCU.

AFCU recognized the OPEDA good-will gesture in an article in their January newsletter to all of their members. They stated that OPEDA was a good neighbor to the Credit Union.

### **OPEDA Announces Unsung Hero Awards Will Be Made during Public Service Recognition Week**

In 2008 OPEDA will again recognize active USDA employees who have been and continue to be Unsung Heroes. During Public Service Recognition

Week, OPEDA will conduct a ceremony in which certificates will be presented to awardees. Agency leadership, including the Secretary of Agriculture is represented at this ceremony and it is followed by a buffet luncheon.

The awards recognize actual planning or performance of duties, tasks or projects and recipients will have demonstrated overall dedication, a positive attitude and a high-level of service – directly related to the employee's job duties - to the public.

Nominations can be made by any USDA employee and by retired OPEDA members in good standing. Council members are especially urged to nominate worthy USDA employees in their respective Regions.

Nomination forms will be available soon on the OPEDA website, <http://www.opeda.net/> and from the OPEDA office. The Regional Representatives (Councilors) will also have copies of the forms. Call (202-720-4898) or E-mail ([opeda@usda.gov](mailto:opeda@usda.gov)) the OPEDA office if you would like to know who your Council Member is. In the past the deadline for submission of nominations has been March 30 of the current year.

### **2007 Scholarship Awards presented**

Jose Burgos, Timothy Gulsvig, Daniel Kyle Pennington, Aisha Davis, Ashley Thompson and Kristina Ovchinnikova were selected as recipients of the 2007 OPEDA John W. Peterson Scholarship. This year, each student received \$500. The six were selected from 20 who submitted applications. Our awardees reflect the diversity of USDA employees and their families; their homes span the

United States and its territories from California to Puerto Rico.

Timothy Gulsvig is a sophomore at Wheaton college; his current grade point average is 3.7. He attended high school in Devils Lake, ND and received a National Merit Scholarship as well as a National Choral Award. Timothy plans to work in the public sector when he graduates; he hopes that he can work in the public sector after graduation, utilize the English and communications skills that he is now acquiring. He believes “that the public sector has the unique challenge of protecting the public interest while dealing with individuals who see only the limitations imposed on them.”

Kristina Ovchinnikova lives in San Francisco, CA and plans to attend the University of California at Santa Cruz. She worked on a Summer Crew for the Student Conservation Association in partnership with the National Park Service to restore a 5-mile stretch of horse trail on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. She believes “that public service is a worthwhile investment of anyone’s time.”

Daniel Kyle Pennington attended Washington County High School in Chatom, AL. He graduated with an Advanced Diploma. He demonstrated leadership in many capacities, including Freshman Class President and Vice President of the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Council and . He participated in basketball, football and baseball and was the 2006 Football Team Captain and was a leader in church activities. He plans to play football with the University of Alabama.

JoseLuis Burgos, Jr. attends the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus where he has maintained an “A” average. He believes that entering public service will help him attain his goal of “promoting, preserving and defending the values which all aspire to carry this world to a just and better place to live.” As a former 4-H Club member, he pursued interests in dairy, poultry and coffee.

Aisha Davis of Lanham, MD attends Washington and Lee University where she has been recognized as a natural born leader and a role model who epitomizes true professionalism. She believes that “the greatest challenges of the civil service lie in the

delicacies surrounding maintenance of the sensitive balance between civil service and public interest” and that “with it (public service) connections are made across borders, languages and beliefs.”

Ashley Thompson has been admitted to the President’s Leadership Program, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA. The leadership of George Mason High School, Falls Church, VA, acclaimed her personality, character and performance. Ashley participated in the USDA Student Experiential Employment Program as an employee of the Agricultural Research Service. Ashley recognizes that “tremendous rewards (are) to be gained from making a personal commitment to public service.

### **OPEDA Christmas Party**

OPEDA celebrated the December holiday season with a noontime Christmas Party and luncheon. A gift on behalf of OPEDA was presented to the Combined Federal Campaign for 2007.

### **Short Term Program on Telecommuting for Local Chapter Meetings**

OPEDA would like to develop a training module concerning effective telecommuting. OPEDA supports telecommuting, especially in urban areas with high concentration of U. S. Dept. Agr. workers. If you have participated in telecommuting, OPEDA would be interested in learning of your experiences, positive and negative. Your suggestions would also be helpful. OPEDA believes that successful telecommuting results when employees have clearly defined objectives, are assigned tasks that contribute to successful implementation of the objectives and are given reasonable and firm deadlines for task completion. How telecommuting employees and their supervisors actually are mutually successful in these endeavors and how their methodologies can be transmitted, accepted and improved by other “telecommuting wannabe’s” should provide for fascinating interchanges.

A significant byproduct would be the reduction of the carbon footprint!!

### **Candidate Tracking Website**

The new website of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania is tracking candidates. The site went live on January 1, 2008. You can reach the site at <http://thenextgovernment.com>. Steve Barr's column, "Promises Tracked," in a recent issue of *The Washington Post*, summarizes some of the findings.

### **Pay-for-Performance Initiatives May Be Considered Again**

We had believed that the Pay for Performance issue had retreated into the background. Some recent work by researchers at Rand Corporation states that wages and promotion are less dependent on merit and/or performance than on tenure. We note that there is growing opposition by organizations such as government employee unions and other groups to pay-for performance. In spite of this opposition, the Rand report suggests that the current pay system could be reformed. Federal Computer Week reports on this issue at <http://www.fcw.com/on>. A recent column by Steve Barr indicates that pay for the National Security Personnel System of the Department of Defense workforce may be on a pay for performance pilot program.

### **Conference Board Researcher Suggests that Managers May Need New Strategies in order to Use Older Workers Effectively.**

Members of the Conference Board Research Working group on Mature Worker Engagement have prepared a report on reinventing the aging workforce in the private sector. One major suggestion was to that an individual company should analyze its own workforce of the company before taking major steps to hire based on national labor force projections. The same philosophy might be applicable to hiring by various agencies or major segments of agencies.

The report also suggests that hiring entities take a good look at motivating older workers, rather than assuming that they were just "retiring on the job." When a young worker "retires on the job," he or she is given coaching or a new assignment. Perhaps similar treatment of older "retired" workers would result in an increase in their productivity as well.

### **Professional Liability Protection**

OPEDA members may be interested in learning that they can obtain professional liability insurance from the Federal Employee Defense Services Association. Additional information can be obtained at [www.fedsprotection.com](http://www.fedsprotection.com). OPEDA has previously indicated that this insurance is also available from Wright & Co./CSEBA at [www.wrightandco.com](http://www.wrightandco.com)

### **Planning Underway for 2008 Meeting of the OPEDA Council**

The OPEDA Council (made up of the Regional Representatives) and the Board of Directors and developing plans for a two day meeting during Public Service Recognition Week. The names of the Council members are on the OPEDA website; they are provided again in this newsletter. Contact the OPEDA office if you need contact information for your Council member.

The Council will discuss some of the following issues: strengthening working partnerships with agencies, individual security on the job, ethical issues and provisions of the Hatch Act, crediting federal service for retirement, teleworking, civil rights issues and how to deal with them including items important to middle management, pay issues, recognition of outstanding performance on the job by both the USDA workforce in general and OPEDA members in particular, effective use of the internet to obtain information on Department and agency directives and morale concerns as these affect productivity on the job and employee relationships with the general public

Let your Council Member know about your concerns related to work or to the functioning of the OPEDA organization. Two heads are better than one and who knows what the entire Council can develop.

### **When Will You Be Able to Bypass Paperwork to Retire?**

According to Gregg Carlstrom of the *Federal Times* (December 28, 2007, Vol. 72, No. 248) feds can apply for retirement benefits and insurance online. He also states that OPM is creating Web-based tools to provide a breakdown of individual benefits.

Further checking revealed a reference in the Code of Federal Regulations Page 73573, 5CFR Part 850, RIN 3206-AL34.

Apparently OPM has noted that paper-based retirement procedures will continue for a while so that employees who are less accustomed to “tech” procedures won’t have to use the Web.

Employees at GSA will be able to use the program in early 2008, but it apparently will not be implemented for employees government wide until early 2009.

### **Pay Tables Available at OPM Website**

The 2008 pay schedule has been announced; the Office of Personnel Management has the current salary schedules. These General Schedule (GS) base and locality pay tables can be accessed by going to the website <http://opm.gov> and then clicking on Salaries and Wages followed by clicking on General Schedules and Locality Pay.

### **FEHBP for 2008**

Several dental and visual insurance plans were put into place for federal employees this year. In the past, success in obtaining reimbursement for dental work varied with the plan selected. Usually, the dental service provider must be a “member” or “participant” in the plan for reimbursement to occur. OPEDA would be interested in the success that our members have in using the plans they have selected.

### **Federal Pay Issues**

OPEDA has prepared a draft letter to be sent to selected members of Congress on Federal Pay Compensation, as follows:

The Organization of Professional Employees of the Department of Agriculture (OPEDA) continues to be concerned about the ad hoc and confusing way federal employee annual pay rates are set each year, despite the existence of federal legislation, and numerous regulations that seem to be outdated due to what has become an annual tradition of complex maneuvering to avoid the legislative intent.

There is now an established annual departure from use of the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act (FEPCA) of 1990. The intent of the legislation was to achieve approximate pay parity in ten years for the work performed by federal employees, compared with similar jobs—by locality-- in the private sector.

Under the provisions of FEPCA, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) surveys non federal organizations to determine the salaries and pay, which the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) uses to compare federal and nonfederal pay and calculate appropriate pay raises for federal employees. After more than 10 years, data shows little progress in achieving parity with private sector work.

Continued questions about the methods used to develop federal vs. non-federal pay comparisons have grown increasingly irritating to many hard working federal employees, in view of the care with which the BLS data is collected. In 2007 House testimony on federal GS pay, and pay rates outside of government, Curtis Copeland, Congressional Research Service (CRS) specialist, indicated that the methods of pay comparisons used by the BLS and OPM have been examined and “found to be valid and reliable.”

Further, Mr. Copeland also said: “OPM reviews have found consistently that federal pay lags behind the private sector by as much as 50 percent in some localities.” This could be quite an understatement. For example, the December 10, 2007, special section of the Philadelphia Inquirer published a table showing compensation in 2006 of CEO’s at Philadelphia area companies. Total compensation for the top 100 executives were ranked, with base salary, annual bonus, and stock awards. The report indicated that in the Philadelphia area compensation was weighted toward cash—salary and bonuses, with an average of 60.2 percent in cash, as compared with equity compensation. The lowest paid of the 100 executives received only \$1,872,853 in 2006—all base salary or bonus cash.

OPEDA feels it is past time for Congress to take another look at federal employees pay legislation,

and develop a new responsible and fair federal pay system.

Sincerely .  
OPEDA Legislative Chair

### **Holiday Party in Region 23, Pennsylvania and New Jersey**

Kathleen Rajkowski, Council member for Region 23, shows off the cake OPEDA provided for the Holiday Celebration at the ARS laboratory in Wyndmoor, PA.



### **Public Service Academy Proposed**

The magazine, *Government Executive*, reports that legislation has been introduced in both the Senate and the House to establish a Public Service Academy. John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm in Washington, DC, is also working with government and non-government organizations on such legislation. The proposal would establish a 5,000 member undergraduate academy that would be free to students in exchange for a five-year service commitment to the government at the local, state or federal level. Students would be nominated by members of Congress much as they are at military service academies and be required to study abroad and to complete internships with nonprofit and military organization. OPEDA will be following the progress of this controversial proposal.

### **Report from the Field**

Randy Edwards, Council Member from Region 14, Indiana and Illinois, reports that USDA Employee Services and Recreation Association (ESRA) offers liability insurance through Mass Benefits

Consultants, 800-221-3083. ESRA can be reached through <http://www.usdaesra.org/> The office and store are just down the hall from OPEDA, so employees in the South Building can obtain information directly.

### **OPEDA Scholarship**

The Peterson OPEDA Scholarship is available again this year. The deadline for applying is July 30, 2008. Application forms are available on the USDA website, [www.usda.gov/opeda](http://www.usda.gov/opeda) or can be obtained by contacting the OPEDA office at [opeda@usda.gov](mailto:opeda@usda.gov) or 202-720-4898 or P.O. Box 381, Washington, DC 20044.

### **Regional Information - OPEDA**

Every OPEDA member is assigned to a Region based primarily on geographic location of the workplace. We reprint the information for your convenience. Current Representatives include:

Region 1. AK, ID, WA – **Hal Swenson**; 2. OR – **Ray Brokken**; 3. N. CA, NV – **Wallace Yokayama**; 4. S CA, HI, GU – **Joe Smilanick**; 5. AZ, NM – **Richard Shaw**. 6. CO, UT, WY – **Ray Anderson**; 7. MT, ND, SD – **Dale van Eckhout**; 8. IA, NE – **Richard T. Clark**; 9. KS, OK – **James Krueger**; 10E. East Texas – **Robert Purdom**; 10W. West Texas – **Eddy M. Spurgin**; 11. AR, LA – **Burthel Thomas**; 12. MO – vacant; 13. MN, WI – **Michael Lieurance**; 14. IL, IN – **Randy Edwards**; 15. KY, TN – **Larry Duewer**; 16. AL, MS – **Carl Pennington**; 17. FL, PE – **Michael Botelho**; 18. GA – **James M. Terry**; 19. NC, SC – **Curtis Hobbs, Jr.** 20. VA, WV – **Holly Hambley**; 21. MI, OH – **Howard Terry Nicholson**; 22. New England – **Julian Drelich**; 23. PA, NJ – **Kathleen Rajkowski**; 24. DE, MD – **Willie Pittman**; 25. DC area – FAS, FSA, OSEC – **Louis Iacoletti**; 26. DC area – Economics, Extension, Statistical Agencies, Research – **Dwight Gadsby**; 27. DC area – AMS, APHIS, FGIS, FNS, FSIS, HNIS – **Winona Scott**; 28. DC Area – RD, RUS, NRCS, FS – **Ed Dickerhoof**.

Do we have a volunteer to represent Missouri on the Council?

## **Membership**

Please notify OPEDA of any address change by E-mail to [oped@usda.gov](mailto:oped@usda.gov); by mail to OPEDA, P.O. Box 381, Washington, DC 20044; or by telephone at 202-720-4898. If we have your current E-mail address, we can greatly reduce mailing costs by E-mailing our newsletter and other items of importance to you. This is especially important for newly retired employees.

## **Future Activities**

. OPEDA encourages a professional approach by both employees and management to all aspects of on-the-job performance.

Again we encourage OPEDA members communicate their views on topics of interest to them to their Council Members or to the OPEDA office. OPEDA can better address issues that it knows are important to its membership\

OPEDA always wants to consider *your* suggestions concerning activities that would provide efficient and effective support to you as an employed or retired member

OPEDA tries to facilitate the provision of requested information on specialized topics to individual members as their needs become apparent. particularly dental insurance; pay comparability; teleworking, expedite getting laptop computers,