

# U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army

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#2009-09-29-1

**2009: THE YEAR OF THE NCO**

Sept. 29, 2009

## Survey gives servicemembers an opportunity to take part in ensuring accurate Cost of Living Allowance rates

**By Staff Sgt. Patricia Deal**

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

**HEIDELBERG, Germany** – U.S. Army Europe Soldiers and their Families in select communities will have the chance to directly affect part of their paychecks this year by taking part in the Living Pattern Survey.



ILLUSTRATION BY SGT CARLOS NORAT

Results from the online survey help determine amounts of Overseas Cost of Living Allowance paid to service members stationed overseas, according to William Gordon, finance policy specialist from the USAREUR personnel directorate here.

Overseas COLA is designed to allow service members outside the United States to maintain the purchasing power they would have if stationed in the U.S.

“It is so important that all Soldiers and Family members who are eligible ... participate in the survey ... so we can have the most accurate data possible. The LPS is one of the ‘building blocks’ of COLA, and the key to success of an accurate determination of the rates to have maximum participation and good data,” Gordon said. The LPS survey is normally done every three years, Gordon said, but the last survey here was in 2005. “We’re back on schedule now and need to be sure to get 100 percent participation.”

From Oct. 1 - 31, eligible Soldiers will be able to access the survey via the “Hot Topics” link on the USAREUR home page. Gordon explained that the link goes directly to the Web site for the Defense Travel Management Office, which manages COLA.

According to the DTMO directive, those Soldiers required to complete the LPS are all Soldiers not living in the barracks, who are on permanent duty orders to Germany and who have been in

country for at least three months, and are assigned to one of the following communities: Ansbach, Bremerhaven, Garmisch, Geilenkirchen, Heidelberg, Hohenfels, the Kaiserslautern Military Community (Kaiserslautern, Landstuhl, Ramstein and Sembach), Kalkar, Spangdahlem, Stuttgart, Vilseck, Grafenwoehr, and Wiesbaden.

“Typically the LPS is used to identify shopping patterns -- how much the Soldier buys on the economy versus from the PX and commissary. We identified those specific communities to give us a representative sampling from three areas: fully supported, partially supported, and nonsupported,” Gordon explained.

Gordon encouraged service members within those communities to fill out the survey with their spouses or other Family members who do shopping in their households. “We’re putting out information to Family Readiness Groups and Army Community Service to be sure to let spouses of deployed servicemembers know that they can fill out the survey, too.”

The survey is quite detailed, covering most common purchases such as groceries, personal care items, appliances, recreation, transportation, and day care. The survey asks where members purchased basic goods and services, such as from outlets on the local economy, on-base outlets such as commissaries and exchanges, and purchases made from catalogs, export houses or online.

“It really is a chance to make an impact without a lot of effort. The survey is very simple and straightforward,” said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Luis Lopez, NCO-in-charge in the office of the USAREUR command sergeant major. Lopez participated in the last survey, and said he is already gathering his information for the new survey. “My family and I do a lot of shopping on the economy as well as at the PX. I’m more than happy to fill out the survey as a way to provide (the Army’s finance system) with whatever information they need to help them determine the COLA rates.”

The results of the survey are used to form the retail price survey, or Market Basket Survey, which takes place Nov. 1 - 30. Retail Price Schedules are conducted annually in overseas and stateside locations to collect approximately six to nine prices at on- and off-base sources for items on a list of 120 goods and services identified in the LPS.

Gordon said commander of each community designated to participate in the survey chooses a locality point of contact -- its secret shopper” -- to perform the Retail Price Survey scheduled from 1-30 November 2009. Based on guidance provided by USAREUR financial policy experts, the secret shoppers shop at the PX, commissary, stores on the local economy, and other places for those 120 specific items, broken down into 12 categories such as groceries, clothing, recreation, day care and medical and dental care.

“The DTMO uses results compiled from the Germany Market Basket Survey and the data collected from the stateside Market Basket Surveys to help compute COLA index rates,” Gordon said. “Economic conditions in the States obviously have a direct impact on overseas COLA rates. But we don’t anticipate any major increase or decrease in the overseas rate in the near future.”

The last major change to the overseas COLA rate for USAREUR was a four-point deduction phased in from May through August 2009. According to information on the DTMO Web site, annual survey data from Germany and data on the rate of inflation collected in the United States during the last two years showed the purchasing power gap between the U.S. and Germany had

narrowed from 24 to 16 percent because the prices of goods and services in the U.S. were rising at a greater rate than in Germany.

To access the survey, go to [www.hqusareur.army.mil](http://www.hqusareur.army.mil) and click on the link under "Hot Topics." For more information or assistance with technical issues with the online LPS survey, contact Gordon at 370-3888 or 06221-57-3888, or by e-mail at [bill.gordon@eur.army.mil](mailto:bill.gordon@eur.army.mil). For more information about overseas COLA, visit the DTMO Web site at [www.defensetravel.dod.mil/perdiem](http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/perdiem).



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