

# **Internal Revenue Service Regulation 1.125-3**

**Effect of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) on the operation of a cafeteria plan**

**§1.125-3 Effect of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) on the operation of cafeteria plans.—**

Q-1: May an employee revoke coverage or cease payment of his or her share of group health plan premiums when taking unpaid FMLA, 29 U.S.C. 2601 et seq., leave?

A-1: Yes. An employer must either allow an employee on unpaid FMLA leave to revoke coverage, or continue coverage but allow the employee to discontinue payment of his or her share of the premium for group health plan coverage (including a health flexible spending arrangement (FSA)) under a cafeteria plan for the period of the FMLA leave. See 29 CFR 825.209(e). FMLA does not require that an employer allow an employee to revoke coverage if the employer pays the employee's share of premiums. As discussed in Q&A-3, if the employer continues coverage during an FMLA leave, the employer may recover the employee's share of the premiums when the employee returns to work. FMLA also provides the employee a right to be reinstated in the group health plan coverage (including a health FSA) provided under a cafeteria plan upon returning from FMLA leave if the employee's group health plan coverage terminated while on FMLA leave (either by revocation or due to nonpayment of premiums). Such an employee is entitled, to the extent required under FMLA, to be reinstated on the same terms as prior to taking FMLA leave (including family or dependent coverage), subject to any changes in benefit levels that may have taken place during the period of FMLA leave as provided in 29 CFR 825.215(d)(1). See 29 CFR 825.209(e) and 825.215(d). In addition, such an employee has the right to revoke or change elections under §1.125-4 (e.g., because of changes in status or cost or coverage changes as provided under §1.125-4) under the same terms and conditions as are available to employees participating in the cafeteria plan who are working and not on FMLA leave.

Q-2: Who is responsible for making premium payments under a cafeteria plan when an employee on FMLA leave continues group health plan coverage?

A-2: FMLA provides that an employee is entitled to continue group health plan coverage during FMLA leave whether or not that coverage is provided under a health FSA or other component of a cafeteria plan. See 29 CFR 825.209(b). FMLA permits an employer to require an employee who chooses to continue group health plan coverage while on FMLA leave to be responsible for the share of group health premiums that would be allocable to the employee if the employee were working, and, for this purpose, treats amounts paid pursuant to a pre-tax salary reduction agreement as amounts allocable to the employee. However, FMLA requires the employer to continue to contribute the share of the cost of the employee's coverage that the employer was paying before the employee commenced FMLA leave. See 29 CFR 825.100(b) and 825.210(a).

Q-3: What payment options are required or permitted to be offered under a cafeteria plan to an employee who continues group health plan coverage while on unpaid FMLA leave, and what is the tax treatment of these payments?

A-3: (a) *In general.* Subject to the limitations described in paragraph (b) of this Q&A-3, a cafeteria plan may offer one or more of the following payment options, or a combination of these options, to an employee who continues group health plan coverage (including a health FSA) while on unpaid FMLA leave; provided that the payment options for employees on FMLA leave are offered on terms at least as favorable as those offered to employees not on FMLA leave. These options are referred to in this section as pre-pay, pay-as-you-go, and catch-up. See also the FMLA notice requirements at 29 CFR 825.301(b)(1)(iv).

(1) *Pre-pay.* (i) Under the pre-pay option, a cafeteria plan may permit an employee to pay, prior to commencement of the FMLA leave period, the amounts due for the FMLA leave period. However, FMLA provides that the employer may not mandate that an employee pre-pay the amounts due for the leave period. See 29 CFR 825.210(c)(3) and (4).

(ii) Contributions under the pre-pay option may be made on a pre-tax salary reduction basis from any taxable compensation (including from unused sick days or vacation days). However, see Q&A-5 of this section regarding additional restrictions on pre-tax salary reduction contributions when an employee's FMLA leave spans two cafeteria plan years.

(iii) Contributions under the pre-pay option may also be made on an after-tax basis.

(2) *Pay-as-you-go.* (i) Under the pay-as-you-go option, employees may pay their share of the premium payments on the same schedule as payments would have been made if the employee were not on leave or under any other payment schedule permitted by the Labor Regulations at 29 CFR 825.210(c) (e.g., on the same schedule as payments are made under section 4980B (relating to coverage under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA), 26 U.S.C. 4980B), under the employer's existing rules for payment by employees on leave without pay, or under any other C6/ROP 10-12-01 system voluntarily agreed to between the employer and the employee that is not inconsistent with this section or with 29 CFR 825.210(c)).

(ii) Contributions under the pay-as-you-go option are generally made by the employee on an after-tax basis. However, contributions may be made on a pre-tax basis to the extent that the contributions are made from taxable compensation (e.g., from unused sick days or vacation days) that is due the employee during the leave period.

(iii) An employer is not required to continue the group health coverage of an employee who fails to make required premium payments while on FMLA leave, provided that the employer follows the notice procedures required under FMLA. See 29 CFR 825.212. However, if the employer chooses to continue the health coverage of an employee who fails to pay his or her share of the premium payments while on FMLA leave, FMLA permits the employer to recoup the premiums (to the extent of the employee's share). See 29 CFR 825.212(b). Such recoupment may be made as set forth in paragraphs (a)(3)(i) and (ii) of this Q&A-3. See also Q&A-6 of this section regarding coverage under a health FSA when an employee fails to make the required premium payments while on FMLA leave.

(3) *Catch-up.* (i) Under the catch-up option, the employer and the employee may agree in advance that the group coverage will continue during the period of unpaid FMLA leave, and that the employee will not pay premiums until the employee returns from the FMLA leave. Where an employee is electing to use the catch-up option, the employer and the employee must agree in advance of the coverage period that: the employee elects to continue health coverage while on unpaid FMLA leave; the employer assumes responsibility for advancing payment of the premiums on the employee's behalf during the FMLA leave; and these advance amounts are to be paid by the employee when the employee returns from FMLA leave.

(ii) When an employee fails to make required premium payments while on FMLA leave, an employer is permitted to utilize the catch-up option to recoup the employee's share of premium payments when the employee returns from FMLA leave. See, e.g., 29 CFR 825.212(b). If the employer chooses to continue group coverage under these circumstances, the prior agreement of the employee, as set forth in paragraph (a)(3)(i) of this Q&A-3, is not required.

(iii) Contributions under the catch-up option may be made on a pre-tax salary reduction basis from any available taxable compensation (including from unused sick days and vacation days) after the employee returns from FMLA leave. The cafeteria plan may provide for the catch-up option to apply on a pre-tax salary reduction basis if premiums have not been paid on any other basis (i.e., have not been paid under the pre-pay or pay-as-you-go options or on a catch-up after-tax basis).

(iv) Contributions under the catch-up option may also be made on an after-tax basis.

(b) *Exceptions.* Whatever payment options are offered to employees on non-FMLA leave must be offered to employees on FMLA leave. In accordance with 29 CFR 825.210(c), cafeteria plans may offer one or more of the payment options described in paragraph (a) of this Q&A-3, with the following exceptions:

(1) FMLA does not permit the pre-pay option to be the sole option offered to employees on FMLA leave. However, the cafeteria plan may include pre-payment as an option for employees on FMLA leave, even if such option is not offered to employees on non-FMLA leave-without-pay.

(2) FMLA allows the catch-up option to be the sole option offered to employees on FMLA leave if and only if the catch-up option is the sole option offered to employees on non-FMLA leave-without-pay.

(3) If the pay-as-you-go option is offered to employees on non-FMLA leave-without-pay, the option must also be offered to employees on FMLA leave. The employer may also offer employees on FMLA leave the pre-pay option and/or the catch-up option.

(c) *Voluntary waiver of employee payments.* In addition to the foregoing payment options, an employer may voluntarily waive, on a nondiscriminatory basis, the requirement that employees who elect to continue group health coverage while on FMLA leave pay the amounts the employees would otherwise be required to pay for the leave period.

(d) *Example.* The following example illustrates this Q&A-3:

*Example.* (i) Employer Y allows employees to pay premiums for group health coverage during an FMLA leave on an after-tax basis while the employee is on unpaid FMLA leave. Under the terms of Y's cafeteria plan, if an employee elects to continue health coverage during an unpaid FMLA leave and fails to pay one or more of the after-tax premium payments due for that coverage, the employee's salary after the employee returns from FMLA leave is reduced to cover unpaid premiums (i.e. the premiums that were to be paid by the employee on an after-tax basis during the FMLA leave, but were paid by the employer instead).

(ii) In this *Example*, Y's cafeteria plan satisfies the conditions in this Q&A-3. Y's cafeteria plan would also satisfy the conditions in this Q&A-3 if the plan provided for coverage to cease in the event the employee fails to make a premium payment when due during an unpaid FMLA leave.

Q-4: Do the special FMLA requirements concerning payment of premiums by an employee who continues group health plan coverage under a cafeteria plan apply if the employee is on paid FMLA leave?

A-4: No. The Labor Regulations provide that, if an employee's FMLA leave is paid leave as described at 29 CFR 825.207 and the employer mandates that the employee continue group health plan coverage while on FMLA leave, the employee's share of the premiums must be paid by the method normally used during any paid leave (e.g., by pre-tax salary reduction if the employee's share of premiums were paid by pre-tax salary reduction before the FMLA leave began). See 29 CFR 825.210(b).

Q-5: What restrictions apply to contributions when an employee's FMLA leave spans two cafeteria plan years?

A-5: (a) No amount will be included in an employee's gross income due to participation in a cafeteria plan during FMLA leave, provided that the plan complies with other generally applicable cafeteria plan requirements. Among other requirements, a plan may not operate in a manner that enables employees on FMLA leave to defer compensation from one cafeteria plan year to a subsequent cafeteria plan year. See section 125(d)(2).

(b) The following example illustrates this Q&A-5:

*Example.* (i) Employee A elects group health coverage under a calendar year cafeteria plan maintained by Employer X. Employee A's premium for health coverage is \$100 per month throughout the 12-month period of coverage. Employee A takes FMLA leave for 12 weeks beginning on October 31 after making 10 months of premium payments totaling \$1,000 (10 months x \$100 = \$1,000). Employee A elects to continue health coverage while on FMLA leave and utilizes the pre-pay option by applying his or her unused sick days in order to make the required premium payments due while he or she is on FMLA leave.

(ii) Because A cannot defer compensation from one plan year to a subsequent plan year, A may pre-pay the premiums due in November and December (i.e., \$100 per month) on a pre-tax basis, but A cannot pre-pay the premium payment due in January on a pre-tax basis. If A participates in the cafeteria plan in the subsequent plan year, A must either pre-pay for January on an after-tax basis or use another option (e.g., pay-as-you-go, catch-up, reduction in unused sick days, etc.) to make the premium payment due in January.

Q-6: Are there special rules concerning employees taking FMLA leave who participate in health FSAs offered under a cafeteria plan?

A-6: (a) *In general.* (1) A group health plan that is a flexible spending arrangement (FSA) offered under a cafeteria plan must conform to the generally applicable rules in this section concerning employees who take FMLA leave. Thus, to the extent required by FMLA (see 29 CFR 825.209(b)), an employer must—

(i) Permit an employee taking FMLA leave to continue coverage under a health FSA while on FMLA leave; and

(ii) If an employee is on unpaid FMLA leave, either—

(A) Allow the employee to revoke coverage; or

(B) Continue coverage, but allow the employee to discontinue payment of his or her share of the premium for the health FSA under the cafeteria plan during the unpaid FMLA leave period.

(2) Under FMLA, the plan must permit the employee to be reinstated in health coverage upon return from FMLA leave on the same terms as if the employee had been working throughout the leave period, without a break in coverage. See 29 CFR 825.214(a) and 825.215(d)(1) and paragraph (b)(2) of this Q&A-6. In addition, under FMLA, a plan may require an employee to be reinstated in health coverage upon return from a period of unpaid FMLA leave, provided that employees who return from a period of unpaid leave not covered by the FMLA are also required to resume participation upon return from leave.

(b) *Coverage.* (1) Regardless of the payment option selected under Q&A-3 of this section, for so long as the employee continues health FSA coverage (or for so long as the employer continues the health FSA coverage of an employee who fails to make the required contributions as described in Q&A-3(a)(2)(iii) of this section), the full amount of the elected health FSA coverage, less any prior reimbursements, must be available to the employee at all times, including the FMLA leave period.

(2) (i) If an employee's coverage under the health FSA terminates while the employee is on FMLA leave, the employee is not entitled to receive reimbursements for claims incurred during the period when the coverage is terminated. If an employee subsequently elects or the employer requires the employee to be reinstated in the health FSA upon return from FMLA leave for the remainder of the plan year, the employee may not retroactively elect health FSA coverage for claims incurred during the period when the coverage was terminated. Upon reinstatement into a health FSA upon return from FMLA leave (either because the employee elects reinstatement or because the employer requires reinstatement), the employee has the right under FMLA: to resume coverage at the level in effect before the FMLA leave and make up the unpaid premium payments, or to resume coverage at a level that is reduced and resume premium payments at the level in effect before the FMLA leave. If an employee chooses to resume health FSA coverage at a level that is reduced, the coverage is prorated for the period during the FMLA leave for which no premiums were paid. In both cases, the coverage level is reduced by prior reimbursements.

(ii) FMLA requires that an employee on FMLA leave have the right to revoke or change elections (because of events described in §1.125-4) under the same terms and conditions that apply to employees participating in the cafeteria plan who are not on FMLA leave. Thus, for example, if a group health plan offers an annual open enrollment period to active employees, then, under FMLA, an employee on FMLA leave when the open enrollment is offered must be offered the right to make election changes on the same basis as other

employees. Similarly, if a group health plan decides to offer a new benefit package option and allows active employees to elect the new option, then, under FMLA, an employee on FMLA leave must be allowed to elect the new option on the same basis as other employees.

(3) The following examples illustrate the rules in this Q&A-6:

*Example 1.* (i) Employee B elects \$1,200 worth of coverage under a calendar year health FSA provided under a cafeteria plan, with an annual premium of \$1,200. Employee B is permitted to pay the \$1,200 through pre-tax salary reduction amounts of \$100 per month throughout the 12-month period of coverage. Employee B incurs no medical expenses prior to April 1. On April 1, B takes FMLA leave after making three months of contributions totaling \$300 (3 months x \$100 = \$300). Employee B's coverage ceases during the FMLA leave. Consequently, B makes no premium payments for the months of April, May, and June, and B is not entitled to submit claims or receive reimbursements for expenses incurred during this period. Employee B returns from FMLA leave and elects to be reinstated in the health FSA on July 1.

(ii) Employee B must be given a choice of resuming coverage at the level in effect before the FMLA leave (i.e., \$1,200) and making up the unpaid premium payments (\$300), or resuming health FSA coverage at a level that is reduced on a prorata basis for the period during the FMLA leave for which no premiums were paid (i.e., reduced for 3 months or 1/4 of the plan year) less prior reimbursements (i.e., \$0) with premium payments due in the same monthly amount payable before the leave (i.e., \$100 per month). Consequently, if B chooses to resume coverage at the level in effect before the FMLA leave, B's coverage for the remainder of the plan year would equal \$1,200 and B's monthly premiums would be increased to \$150 per month for the remainder of the plan year, to make up the \$300 in premiums missed (\$100 per month plus \$50 per month (\$300 divided by the remaining 6 months)). If B chooses prorated coverage, B's coverage for the remainder of the plan year would equal \$900, and B would resume making premium payments of \$100 per month for the remainder of the plan year.

*Example 2.* (i) Assume the same facts as *Example 1* except that B incurred medical expenses totaling \$200 in February and obtained reimbursement of these expenses.

(ii) The results are the same as in *Example 1*, except that if B chooses to resume coverage at the level in effect before the FMLA leave, B's coverage for the remainder of the year would equal \$1,000 (\$1,200 reduced by \$200) and the monthly payments for the remainder of the year would still equal \$150. If instead B chooses prorated coverage, B's coverage for the remainder of the plan year would equal \$700 (\$1,200 prorated for 3 months, and then reduced by \$200) and the monthly payments for the remainder of the year would still equal \$100.

*Example 3.* (i) Assume the same facts as *Example 1* except that, prior to taking FMLA leave, B elects to continue health FSA coverage during the FMLA leave. The plan permits B (and B elects) to use the catch-up payment option described in Q&A-3 of this section, and as further permitted under the plan, B chooses to repay the \$300 in missed payments on a ratable basis over the remaining 6-month period of coverage (i.e., \$50 per month).

(ii) Thus, B's monthly premium payments for the remainder of the plan year will be \$150 (\$100 + \$50).

Q-7: Are employees entitled to non-health benefits while taking FMLA leave?

A-7: FMLA does not require an employer to maintain an employee's non-health benefits (e.g., life insurance) during FMLA leave. An employee's entitlement to benefits other than group health benefits under a cafeteria plan during a period of FMLA leave is to be determined by the employer's established policy for providing such benefits when the employee is on non-FMLA leave (paid or unpaid). See 29 CFR 825.209(h). Therefore, an employee who takes FMLA leave is entitled to revoke an election of non-health benefits under a cafeteria plan to the same extent as employees taking non-FMLA leave are permitted to revoke elections of non-health benefits under a cafeteria plan. For example, election changes are permitted due to changes of status or upon enrollment

for a new plan year. See §1.125-4. However, FMLA provides that, in certain cases, an employer may continue an employee's non-health benefits under the employer's cafeteria plan while the employee is on FMLA leave in order to ensure that the employer can meet its responsibility to provide equivalent benefits to the employee upon return from unpaid FMLA. If the employer continues an employee's non-health benefits during FMLA leave, the employer is entitled to recoup the costs incurred for paying the employee's share of the premiums during the FMLA leave period. See 29 CFR 825.213(b). Such recoupment may be on a pre-tax basis. A cafeteria plan must, as required by FMLA, permit an employee whose coverage terminated while on FMLA leave (either by revocation or nonpayment of premiums) to be reinstated in the cafeteria plan on return from FMLA leave. See 29 CFR 825.214(a) and 825.215(d).

Q-8: What is the applicability date of the regulations in this section?

A-8: This section is applicable for cafeteria plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2002. [Reg. §1.125-3.]

**.01 Historical Comment:** Proposed 12/21/95. Adopted 10/16/2001 by T.D. 8966 (corrected 12/10/2001).

FINAL-REG, 2002FED ¶7323C, §1.125-4, **Permitted election changes.**—