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(g) If an employee uses paid leave under circumstances which do not qualify as FMLA leave, the leave will not count against the 12 weeks of FMLA leave to which the employee is entitled. For example, paid sick leave used for a medical condition which is not a serious health condition does not count against the 12 weeks of FMLA leave entitlement.

(h) When an employee or employer elects to substitute paid leave (of any type) for unpaid FMLA leave under circumstances permitted by these regulations, and the employer's procedural requirements for taking that kind of leave are less stringent than the requirements of FMLA (e.g., notice or certification requirements), only the less stringent requirements may be imposed. An employee who complies with an employer's less stringent leave plan requirements in such cases may not have leave for an FMLA purpose delayed or denied on the grounds that the employee has not complied with stricter requirements of FMLA. However, where accrued paid vacation or personal leave is substituted for unpaid FMLA leave for a serious health condition, an employee may be required to comply with any less stringent medical certification requirements of the employer's sick leave program. See §§ 825.302(g), 825.305(e) and 825.306(c).

(i) Section 7(o) of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) permits public employers under prescribed circumstances to substitute compensatory time off accrued at one and one-half hours for each overtime hour worked in lieu of paying cash to an employee when the employee works overtime hours as prescribed by the Act. There are limits to the amounts of hours of compensatory time an employee may accumulate depending upon whether the employee works in fire protection or law enforcement (480 hours) or elsewhere for a public agency (240 hours). Compensatory time off is not a form of accrued paid leave that an employer may require the employee to substitute for unpaid FMLA leave. The employee may request to use his/her balance of compensatory time for an FMLA reason. If the employer permits the accrual to be used in compliance with regulations, 29 CFR 553.25,

the absence which is paid from the employee's accrued compensatory time "account" may not be counted against the employee's FMLA leave entitlement.

[60 FR 2237, Jan. 6, 1995; 60 FR 16383, Mar. 30, 1995]

§ 825.208 Under what circumstances may an employer designate leave, paid or unpaid, as FMLA leave and, as a result, count it against the employee's total FMLA leave entitlement?

(a) In all circumstances, it is the employer's responsibility to designate leave, paid or unpaid, as FMLA-qualifying, and to give notice of the designation to the employee as provided in this section. In the case of intermittent leave or leave on a reduced schedule, only one such notice is required unless the circumstances regarding the leave have changed. The employer's designation decision must be based only on information received from the employee or the employee's spokesperson (e.g., if the employee is incapacitated, the employee's spouse, adult child, parent, doctor, etc., may provide notice to the employer of the need to take FMLA leave). In any circumstance where the employer does not have sufficient information about the reason for an employee's use of paid leave, the employer should inquire further of the employee or the spokesperson to ascertain whether the paid leave is potentially FMLA-qualifying.

(1) An employee giving notice of the need for unpaid FMLA leave must explain the reasons for the needed leave so as to allow the employer to determine that the leave qualifies under the Act. If the employee fails to explain the reasons, leave may be denied. In many cases, in explaining the reasons for a request to use paid leave, especially when the need for the leave was unexpected or unforeseen, an employee will provide sufficient information for the employer to designate the paid leave as FMLA leave. An employee using accrued paid leave, especially vacation or personal leave, may in some cases not spontaneously explain the reasons or their plans for using their accrued leave.

(2) As noted in §825.302(c), an employee giving notice of the need for unpaid FMLA leave does not need to expressly assert rights under the Act or even mention the FMLA to meet his or her obligation to provide notice, though the employee would need to state a qualifying reason for the needed leave. An employee requesting or notifying the employer of an intent to use accrued paid leave, even if for a purpose covered by FMLA, would not need to assert such right either. However, if an employee requesting to use paid leave for an FMLA-qualifying purpose does not explain the reason for the leave—consistent with the employer's established policy or practice—and the employer denies the employee's request, the employee will need to provide sufficient information to establish an FMLA-qualifying reason for the needed leave so that the employer is aware of the employee's entitlement (i.e., that the leave may not be denied) and, then, may designate that the paid leave be appropriately counted against (substituted for) the employee's 12-week entitlement. Similarly, an employee using accrued paid vacation leave who seeks an extension of unpaid leave for an FMLA-qualifying purpose will need to state the reason. If this is due to an event which occurred during the period of paid leave, the employer may count the leave used after the FMLA-qualifying event against the employee's 12-week entitlement.

(b)(1) Once the employer has acquired knowledge that the leave is being taken for an FMLA required reason, the employer must promptly (within two business days absent extenuating circumstances) notify the employee that the paid leave is designated and will be counted as FMLA leave. If there is a dispute between an employer and an employee as to whether paid leave qualifies as FMLA leave, it should be resolved through discussions between the employee and the employer. Such discussions and the decision must be documented.

(2) The employer's notice to the employee that the leave has been designated as FMLA leave may be orally or in writing. If the notice is oral, it shall be confirmed in writing, no later than the following payday (unless the

payday is less than one week after the oral notice, in which case the notice must be no later than the subsequent payday). The written notice may be in any form, including a notation on the employee's pay stub.

(c) If the employer requires paid leave to be substituted for unpaid leave, or that paid leave taken under an existing leave plan be counted as FMLA leave, this decision must be made by the employer within two business days of the time the employee gives notice of the need for leave, or, where the employer does not initially have sufficient information to make a determination, when the employer determines that the leave qualifies as FMLA leave if this happens later. The employer's designation must be made before the leave starts, unless the employer does not have sufficient information as to the employee's reason for taking the leave until after the leave commenced. If the employer has the requisite knowledge to make a determination that the paid leave is for an FMLA reason at the time the employee either gives notice of the need for leave or commences leave and fails to designate the leave as FMLA leave (and so notify the employee in accordance with paragraph (b)), the employer may not designate leave as FMLA leave retroactively, and may designate only prospectively as of the date of notification to the employee of the designation. In such circumstances, the employee is subject to the full protections of the Act, but none of the absence preceding the notice to the employee of the designation may be counted against the employee's 12-week FMLA leave entitlement.

(d) If the employer learns that leave is for an FMLA purpose after leave has begun, such as when an employee gives notice of the need for an extension of the paid leave with unpaid FMLA leave, the entire or some portion of the paid leave period may be retroactively counted as FMLA leave, to the extent that the leave period qualified as FMLA leave. For example, an employee is granted two weeks paid vacation leave for a skiing trip. In mid-week of the second week, the employee contacts the employer for an extension of leave as unpaid leave and advises

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that at the beginning of the second week of paid vacation leave the employee suffered a severe accident requiring hospitalization. The employer may notify the employee that both the extension and the second week of paid vacation leave (from the date of the injury) is designated as FMLA leave. On the other hand, when the employee takes sick leave that turns into a serious health condition (e.g., bronchitis that turns into bronchial pneumonia) and the employee gives notice of the need for an extension of leave, the entire period of the serious health condition may be counted as FMLA leave.

(e) Employers may not designate leave as FMLA leave after the employee has returned to work with two exceptions:

(1) If the employee was absent for an FMLA reason and the employer did not learn the reason for the absence until the employee's return (e.g., where the employee was absent for only a brief period), the employer may, upon the employee's return to work, promptly (within two business days of the employee's return to work) designate the leave retroactively with appropriate notice to the employee. If leave is taken for an FMLA reason but the employer was not aware of the reason, and the employee desires that the leave be counted as FMLA leave, the employee must notify the employer within two business days of returning to work of the reason for the leave. In the absence of such timely notification by the employee, the employee may not subsequently assert FMLA protections for the absence.

(2) If the employer knows the reason for the leave but has not been able to confirm that the leave qualifies under FMLA, or where the employer has requested medical certification which has not yet been received or the parties are in the process of obtaining a second or third medical opinion, the employer should make a preliminary designation, and so notify the employee, at the time leave begins, or as soon as the reason for the leave becomes known. Upon receipt of the requisite information from the employee or of the medical certification which confirms the leave is for an FMLA reason, the preliminary designation becomes final. If

the medical certifications fail to confirm that the reason for the absence was an FMLA reason, the employer must withdraw the designation (with written notice to the employee).

[60 FR 2237, Jan. 6, 1995; 60 FR 16383, Mar. 30, 1995]

§ 825.209 Is an employee entitled to benefits while using FMLA leave?

(a) During any FMLA leave, an employer must maintain the employee's coverage under any group health plan (as defined in the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 at 26 U.S.C. 5000(b)(1)) on the same conditions as coverage would have been provided if the employee had been continuously employed during the entire leave period. All employers covered by FMLA, including public agencies, are subject to the Act's requirements to maintain health coverage. The definition of "group health plan" is set forth in § 825.800. For purposes of FMLA, the term "group health plan" shall not include an insurance program providing health coverage under which employees purchase individual policies from insurers provided that:

(1) no contributions are made by the employer;

(2) participation in the program is completely voluntary for employees;

(3) the sole functions of the employer with respect to the program are, without endorsing the program, to permit the insurer to publicize the program to employees, to collect premiums through payroll deductions and to remit them to the insurer;

(4) the employer receives no consideration in the form of cash or otherwise in connection with the program, other than reasonable compensation, excluding any profit, for administrative services actually rendered in connection with payroll deduction; and,

(5) the premium charged with respect to such coverage does not increase in the event the employment relationship terminates.

(b) The same group health plan benefits provided to an employee prior to taking FMLA leave must be maintained during the FMLA leave. For example, if family member coverage is provided to an employee, family member coverage must be maintained during the FMLA leave. Similarly, benefit