



Hoosier Happenings

Sequester hits workers processing federal-retiree pension claims

By Josh Hicks, Published: April 30

The Office of Personnel Management is planning to reduce its call-center hours and halt overtime for workers who process federal-retiree pensions because of the government-wide spending cuts that took effect last month.

The agency expects the moves to save about \$1.5 million in projected spending as it reduces its budget by about 5 percent under the sequester.

The OPM has struggled in recent years with a backlog of unresolved pension cases, but the numbers have steadily improved since January 2012, when then-Director John Berry hired more workers and increased overtime to address the issue, which he identified as his top priority that year.

The number of unprocessed claims stood at 61,000 when the OPM launched the initiative, but the number dropped to about 37,000 by last month.

The agency said in a statement Monday that “retirees should expect an increase in the time required to process their claims or respond to inquiries” as a result of the overtime suspension and reduced hours. The National Active and Retired Federal Employees association described the OPM’s plan as an unfortunate effect of the sequester.

“Federal retirees have been waiting months for their benefits,” NARFE spokeswoman Jessica Klement said. “OPM has made great strides in reducing those delays, but this will reverse that trend.”

In 2012, the average time to process retirement claims was 156 days, although some retirees complained of waiting twice that long, according to Washington Post reports from that year.

Klement said the OPM backlog may be due in large part to the growing number of federal workers who are retiring. About one-quarter of federal and postal employees were eligible for retirement in 2011, according to OPM data from that year.

A House Oversight subcommittee plans to hold a hearing May 9 to discuss OPM operations, including the processing of retirement claims, which account for about 26 percent of the agency’s overall claims, according to subcommittee staff.

A NARFE representative is expected to testify during the hearing, Klement said.

The OPM’s call center was previously open from 7:30 a.m. to 7:45 p.m., but the new closing time will be 5 p.m.

The agency has not indicated when the overtime suspension, which took effect on Sunday, would end.

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WE ARE FREEZING COLD!!!! But We’re Still Fighting For Our Rights!!



Inside this issue:

APATHY : IT'S TIME FOR A SEMANTIC KNIFE FIGHT 2
By Victoria Ours

AFGE Local 3571 New Local Officers 3
By Cindy Banista

GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSET GRAPE SALAD 3
By Victoria Ours

AFGE official criticizes health insurance proposals in Obama budget 4
Proposals would shift \$8.4 billion in costs onto enrollees over decade

Amad Ali a Trip to Congress 4

Workplace Bullying 5
by Jennifer Kirkham

Systems Sanctions 6
By Georgiann Drake

Know your rights! Weingarten Rights. 7

APATHY : IT'S TIME FOR A SEMANTIC KNIFE FIGHT

By Victoria Ours

Writing an article about the devastating effects of apathy is like writing about a war zone. Apathy erodes your mental toughness. You can easily be brought down without fighting the good fight. Apathy or the "I don't give a darn" attitude can seriously wreck your outlook on life. Apathy is an ill wind which always blows no good. It slyly trickles into your life like dirty water trickles through a crack. Apathy doesn't stalk alone but comes with reinforcements. It's army of mind-numbing recruits are Major Passivity, Lt. Disinterest and Private Complacency. They lurk in the shadows and are well trained combatants.

This band of thugs can keep you from getting involved and engaged. They have cunning ways. They will try their best to persuade you to give up, give in and do nothing. Right now for Social Security employees the environment is ripe for a sneak attack by apathy and company. With the hiring freeze, staff shortages, and the tsunami like waves of customers, claims, PE items etc., it would be very easy to toss in the proverbial towel with both hands. You can hardly read a newspaper, magazine, blog or watch TV without being sucked in by the negativity surrounding Unions and workers who are trying hard to survive, retain membership and remain relevant. Alarm bells should be blasting just as loudly to push back, stand up and shout out against this negativity.

Proud Union workers are not the only potential captives of apathy. When apathy's poisonous tentacles wrap themselves around an organization, it can systematically squeeze the vitality out of the membership and seriously affect its ability to function effectively. Positives such as caring, concern, interest, passion, sympathy and excitement are left gasping for breath. Apathy's army can sweep aside responsibility, judgment, participation and even our awareness. Unions become weakened by complacency. When employees have a sense of "entitlement" the real danger can begin. The problem with taking job security, vacations, safe working conditions and pensions for granted is that when these benefits begin disappearing, complacency has already taken hold and the rights of employees quickly begin vanishing too without anyone fully understanding what has happened. Apathy can destroy a strong organization such as our Union as surely as an F5 tornado can destroy your hometown. It is the perfect storm.

What can you do to combat apathy's destructive power? First of all you have to get mad dog mean! You have to become a guerilla fighter. You already have a full arsenal of tools. Any Union member can conquer apathy today, this minute, by getting involved and energized. Remember that no one has to have all the answers and all the solutions right now. Generations of brave, ordinary folks have been fighting and struggling together for worker's rights for decades. And this battle will rage on. As Unionists, we must take up that banner in our lifetimes and do what we can before passing the torch to the next generation of warriors. It is imperative that we educate ourselves on the critically important issues of our time, because ignorance can be an abundant natural resource.

Don't allow yourself to plunge head first into that apathetic trap by saying or thinking "why bother". Or I don't have time or I'm too stressed out to get involved. Your Union needs you to dust off your ninja armor and join in that battle to defeat those enemies. Members make the Local what it is. What we do or don't do really does matter. Don't watch from the sidelines. Say "Yes!" when asked and become that foot soldier.

So battle stations and may the force be with you!

Congratulation AFGE Local 3571 Officers!!!

Election Results AFGE Local 3571
By Cindy Bantista

The following individuals will serve a three year term as Executive Board members for AFGE Local 3571 commencing May 1, 2013.

President --- William Price

Executive Vice President – Amad Ali

1st VP --- Georgiann Drake

2nd VP --- Dawn Richeal

Secretary/Treasurer --- Jennifer Kirkham

Congratulations to all the AFGE Local 3571 officers! Your service and dedication is truly appreciated.



*You may not know the
contract or the law. That is not
what is going to make you a
great rep.*

*If you want to be a great
Union Representative, you
need to take these words to
heart:*

*Each man's joy is joy to me
Each man's grief is my own
...So, I will defend
Each man as my brother
Each man as my friend!*

*If those words guide your
actions, you will be a great
Union rep and always do
right by the employees we
represent!*

Ralph DeJuliiis

GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSET GRAPE SALAD

By Victoria Ours

2 LBS OF GRAPES (ANY KIND BUT PREFERABLY SWEET)

6-8 OZ YOGURT (ANY FLAVOR - I USUALLY USE STRAWBERRY)

8 OZ OF CREAM CHEESE (SOFTENED)

¼ CUP WHITE SUGAR

1 tsp VANILLA EXTRACT

2 TABLESPOONS BROWN SUGAR

½ CUP CHOPPED NUTS (ANY KIND- I USE WHATEVER I HAVE THAT THE KIDS WON'T EAT FIRST)



MIX YOGURT, CREAM CHEESE, VANILLA AND WHITE SUGAR TOGETHER. STIR GRAPES GENTLY INTO THE MIXTURE. SPREAD INTO A METAL OR PLASTIC PAN (13X9). YOU CAN REFRIDGERATE BEFORE SERVING. RIGHT BEFORE SERVING SPRINKLE WITH BROWN SUGAR AND TOP WITH CHOPPED NUTS. ENJOY WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS DURING YOUR RETIREMENT.

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**American Federation of
Government
Employees**

QUOTES:

"You will make all kinds of mistakes; but as long as you are generous and true, and also fierce, you cannot hurt the world or even seriously distress her."
Winston Churchill

"Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is the only fruit of Labor, and could never have existed if Labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."
Abraham Lincoln

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."
Eleanor Roosevelt



Contact us if you would like to join the Newsletter committee. We take all volunteers, even if you don't have any experience writing articles. Also, if you have an idea for an article, send an abstract or outline to our editorial team: Jennifer Kirkham, Amad Ali, Vicki Ours, Alexander Jacque Jr., and Pamela Williams.

AFGE official criticizes health insurance proposals in Obama budget Proposals would shift \$8.4 billion in costs onto enrollees over decade

The proposals include charging more for federal employees who are ill or overweight, charging more to families with more than two persons, worsening the FEHBP's already severe problems with risk segmentation by introducing regional PPOs, and making changes to prescription drug coverage. The administration would also support FEHBP coverage for domestic partners and other dependents.

"The administration's FY 14 budget piles on with additional cuts to retirement benefits for both CSRS and FERS employees hired before 2013. It is astounding that they would add more than \$8 billion in cuts to FEHBP on top of this," Simon said. "The administration calls this 'modernization' of benefits; we call it cannibalization."

"Federal workers pay on average 30% of premiums and as much as 64% in some plans, yet we are denied information and denied any input in decisions about changes in benefits, changes in administration or changes in the program's structure."



Amad Ali a Trip to Congress

Recent trips to the offices of Congress have been good. For example, personnel at Congressman Young's office requested a list of dates in the coming weeks for regular visits with them and the Congressman so that we can go over more Agency facts and figures. Congressman Young is on the Ways and Means Committee of Congress, which involves Social Security. As I've mentioned to Congressman Young many times, our District has one of the highest number of disabled Social Security recipients in the entire state - a growing number of constituents who deserve our best quality service. Young as well as other lawmakers are empathetic about the effects of the hiring and pay freezes on our quality of service as well as other problems within our current state of affairs. Our Political Action Committee (PAC) is charging ahead towards ongoing communication with our lawmakers. "Anybody" can participate in this effort - Union, non-Union, Management. The more people who get involved, the more successes we will see in our jobs here at SSA. So far, I have already noticed encouraging communications with lawmakers, and, more employees are wanting to get involved. I'd like to see employees from each office arranging regular visits to lawmakers in your respective Districts - let me know if you need any assistance or if you'd like anyone from the Executive Board to go along with you and/or your group. Employees can also collaborate on letters to lawmakers on a regular basis. These are just some of the things we can do together to make a difference. Don't complain about things like benefit cuts, lack of raises and staff, and then do nothing about it. To make a difference, it is imperative that we be involved, and there's no time better than right now to get started.

I am looking forward to hearing from some energetic folks who want to get involved and make a difference.

Workplace Bullying

by Jennifer Kirkham

Workplace bullying refers to repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), which are intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine; or which create a risk to the health or safety of the employee(s). Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power and the behavior is often driven by a need on the part of the bully to control others. Bullying behavior creates feelings of defenselessness and injustice in the target and undermines an individual's right to dignity at work. Often, bullying situations involve employees bullying their peers, rather than a supervisor bullying an employee.

Examples of bullying behavior include:

- being sworn at or shouted at or otherwise verbally abused or humiliated
- unwarranted or invalid criticism
- blaming without justification
- exclusion or social isolation
- excessive monitoring or micromanaging
- being treated differently than others in a work group

Bullying negatively affects both individuals and their employer. Victims of bullying may experience physical and mental health problems such as high levels of stress, reduced self-esteem, anxiety, sleep problems and many other negative effects. Bullying can also be costly to organizations which as a result of bullying can experience low morale, reduced productivity, poor customer service, and increased costs associated with employee turnover, investigations or even legal actions.

What can you do if you are being bullied? First, recognize that you're being bullied and that you are not the source of the problem. Second, report the facts of the bullying to your manager or human resource contact. Third, don't retaliate and don't become a bully yourself. Allow your employer to address the bullying behavior. Finally, remember that your Employee Assistance Program is a resource for non-cost, confidential counseling if you feel the need.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers no cost, confidential counseling and referral for personal, family or work-related concerns. You may contact the EAP at 800-869-0276 or you may securely access services on-line by visiting www.eapconsultants.com, then go to the Member Access page and click on Request EAP Services.

Systems Sanctions

By Georgiann Drake

SSA policy prohibits us from accessing SSA records or databases to view or act on any official matters involving your Social Security records or records belonging to your relatives, friends, coworkers, or acquaintances. We are still not permitted to use our official access to SSA's computer systems to access our own record or that of family members, friends, coworkers, or acquaintances—even to perform the same types of actions that are permitted via the Internet. Do not ask a coworker to obtain information on yourself, friends or relatives.

In addition, do not access SSA records or databases to:

- Obtain, review, or use personal data about a member of the public when you do not need or use such data in your Social Security work.
- Obtain, review, or release information about anyone for nonwork purposes. This includes celebrities, sports figures, friends, relatives, coworkers, or yourself.
- Assist friends in filing income tax returns.
- Locate or release individuals' addresses and other information for non-program purposes (such as planning class reunions, genealogical research).

Act on any official matter involving Social Security records belonging to yourself, your relatives, your friends, or coworkers.

Detecting Violations

All employees should be aware of the following Agency tools available to management for use to detect criminal violations.

Integrity Reviews – These include the Integrity Review Handbook, Enumeration Reviews, CIRP Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) Review, CIRP Title II Review, and the Modernized Earning Integrity Review (MEIRS). These reviews identify transactions which have a high fraud potential.

Example of a CIRP Alert: An Officer in charge opens and closes the office and is processing work prior to 6:00 a.m. and after 6:00 p.m.

Security Alerts – Security alerts are systems generated for many transactions which are highly susceptible to fraud and abuse. These alerts bring potentially fraudulent transactions to the attention of component and regional security officers.

Example of a Security Alert: An employee is obtaining multiple queries and processing work for an individual with the same last name, maiden name, coworker, etc.

Audit Trail System (ATS) – The ATS monitors SSA systems and collects information based on transactions entered by individual systems users. It is used to provide information to support the investigation of individuals suspected of fraud.

Example of an ATS: If you are under suspicion of a systems violation, management can conduct a “dump” on your record and track everything you have done on the system via your PIN.

When in doubt do not do it!

Ask for guidance.

Also, please remember that your local Union Representatives and members of the Executive Board are always here to help you, and will address any questions and concerns!

Informal or formal counseling is the first step in discipline (Article 23); generally, SSA will refuse to allow the Union to be present. ASK for a rep, stating that counseling is the first step in discipline. Therefore, if you are being counseled, you can reasonably expect that discipline can happen next. Make them say you will not be allowed to have a Union Rep present. Do not be insubordinate. Sit, listen write down everything, including time, date, whose office.

If they ask if you have anything to say, I would respond, "I was denied Union representation. You are now asking me questions. This is now counseling; this is an investigation and I want Union representation. If you are ordering me to respond to your question, I will do so under protest."

That should end the meeting. As you get up to leave, I would say, "I would like to meet with my local rep now or call the Union (if you don't have a local rep)."

SSA can say yes, no or later. If no or later, when you go on break or after you sign out but before you log off, email one of your Union officers!

FYI, should management attempt to hold a discussion with you that you think may lead to an adverse action, you can invoke the rights listed below....

Know your rights!

WEINGARTEN RIGHTS

"If this discussion could, in any way, lead to my being disciplined/terminated, or affect my personal working conditions, I request that my steward/union officer be present at the meeting. Without representation, I choose not to answer any questions.

This is my right under a Supreme Court decision called Weingarten.

