

Our thanks to James Salzer for his thorough reporting of retirees' challenging circumstances. Thanks also to GSRA members Lorr Elias, Anita Gidden, Roger Mullican and Maggie Williams for agreeing to be interviewed. GSRA keeps working for you to overcome setbacks and obstacles. We've all got to keep working together through GSRA.

This wouldn't have happened without the efforts of Chuck Freedman of GSRA who has been pitching our story to Mr. Salzer for years and who coordinated the interviews with him. GSRA keeps working for you despite the recent setbacks and obstacles. We've all got to keep working together through GSRA.

Below is the article as it appears in today's AJC (6-11-23)

Georgia retirees struggle to get by after years without pensions raises



Caption

Credit: arvin.temkar@ajc.com

POLITICS

By [James Salzer](#), *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

2 hours ago

Margaret Williams gave what she considers the best years of her life to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, working primarily in administrative roles.

She retired in 2017 after several years of getting few if any raises following the Great Recession, making about \$45,000 a year and hoping her state pension would give her a decent retirement.

But the 54,000 former state government retirees on pensions went 13 years without a cost-of-living increase, and inflation that hit when COVID-19 did proved devastating financially. Now many of them — those who worked for lower-than-market salaries for decades — are finding that their retirement benefits don't go far enough.

"I left (the state job) because of medical problems. A lot of it is going untreated. I need a new pair of glasses, I can't afford the dental work I need," said Williams, 67, of Palmetto. "My house costs go up. ... I might get to stay here another year or two.

"This is the kind of thanks you get for giving the best years of your life. This is what you get? It breaks my heart."

Those feelings were compounded recently when Gov. Brian Kemp told the Employees' Retirement System to disregard instructions the General Assembly gave the agency to spend \$26.7 million to pay for what amounted to a small pension bonus. Kemp said it was up to the ERS board to figure out how to spend the money, not the Legislature. The governor said he asked agencies to disregard spending about \$200 million overall because lawmakers passed a state budget with a massive Medicaid shortfall.

State retirees have been battling for more than a decade to get ERS to resurrect 3% annual cost-of-living increases — the same as ex-teachers receive — that they say they were promised.

Retirees say decades ago state officials promised to continue pension COLAs in exchange for not getting sizable pay raises. They say the annual retirement increases continued until the late 2000s, when Gov. Sonny Perdue and lawmakers changed state law so that new hires no longer received full pensions.

At the time, some lawmakers were calling the pension system unsustainable. Its director in 2007 told lawmakers the system faced a potential \$16 billion shortfall in coming years as baby boomers continued to retire. Investment returns during the Great Recession additionally strained the system's finances.

Much of private industry long ago eliminated pensions for workers, but they're seen as an important recruitment and retention tool for governments such as the state of Georgia. Supporters say the guarantee of a monthly check upon retirement makes up for years of working jobs that often pay less than similar ones in private industry. The importance of pensions as a recruitment and retention tool [was highlighted last month](#) when Col. Chris Wright, commissioner of the Department of Public Safety, urged lawmakers to approve legislation [to bring back pensions for law enforcement](#). Wright said 401(k) funds allow recruits to join the force, save for a few years while working for the Georgia State Patrol and take the money when they leave for another job.



Credit: Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com

He said it costs the state \$146,000 to train a trooper. And once they join the force, they often don't stay long.

State Rep. Chuck Martin, R-Alpharetta, a member of the House Retirement Committee and a pension system watchdog for years, doubts the state can afford to create a new pension system. “This is going to be tremendously expensive,” he said.

As in any pension system, the ERS payouts that former state staffers receive vary, based on their length of service and top salaries while on the job. Lower-paid workers, such as prison guards, for instance, receive a much smaller pension than somebody who retired after running a state agency and was making a big salary.

For employees such as Williams, the fact that raises were few and far between from 2008 into the late 2010s meant when they retired, their pensions were based on salaries they’d essentially been earning since the start of the Great Recession.

Highly paid state employees who put in 30 to 34 years can earn \$100,000 or \$200,000 pensions, but those are outliers. Jim Potvin, who runs ERS, said the average pension is about \$26,100 per year. Pensioners also can get Social Security.

Lawmakers have heard pleas from retirees for years, and recently they’ve funded bonus checks. Last year retirees got a 1.5% COLA. This year the ERS board approved a 0.5% increase. But the average inflation rate last year was 8%, after jumping in 2021. Costs have continued to climb this year.

“At the grocery store, buying gas, medical costs have gone up. Our electric bill went up \$50 a month,” said Roger Mullican, 71, of Valdosta, who worked in children and family services for the state and has suffered from a number of health problems. “Initially when I retired, I was managing well on my retirement benefits. Now, my retirement and Social Security equals what I was taking home in 2003.

“It’s very difficult to manage from one month to the next,” he said.

Lawmakers have been paying attention. House Appropriations Chairman [Matt Hatchett](#), R-Dublin, made a point of calling out the \$26.7 million added to the budget for retirees when he explained the state spending plan for the upcoming fiscal year. “There are more than 54,000 retirees and beneficiaries who committed years of their lives to public service,” he told colleagues in explaining the increase.

No longer feel valued

While they appreciate the support, it may not be enough to keep retirees such as Lorr Elias, 70, of Savannah in their homes.

Elias spent more than two decades working for the Department of Juvenile Justice, including as a regional administrator. Before that she was one of the first female police officers hired in Brunswick.



Credit: James Salzer

She said she dedicated 24 hours a day to her job, even through a lengthy illness to her husband.

“We had a nice home on Wilmington Island. That had to go to take care of him,” she said.

Now she faces another move because she can’t afford the rent at her current place.

Elias said she’d be willing to work, but she has crippling arthritis and can no longer type.

“I don’t eat as much as I used to, I don’t go anywhere, I don’t do anything that costs money,” she said. “I get out and I walk around. That is about it. That’s how I save money, I eat less, do nothing.”

Elias said a handbook she received when she joined the state promised good retirement benefits and regular cost-of-living increases.

“Right now they need to make good on this horrendous wrong,” she said. “They need to restore us before they add to anybody else’s (retirement). I want to tell the new hires, ‘They are going to tell you all these things, but when you retire, you will not be a priority.’”

The Georgia State Retirees Association earlier this year released a report on responses to a survey of 1,100 retirees. More than 450 retirees wrote narratives describing day-to-day challenges, and the association said 96% reported experiencing at least one of 12 hardships in the query, such as having trouble paying utility bills, rent or mortgage on time or delaying filling prescriptions or splitting dosages to make them last longer. Almost half reported they were experiencing at least six of the 12 potential hardships.

A large number of them, the association reported, have had to return to work to pay their bills.

Anita Gidden, a 53-year-old former Department of Corrections officer and investigator who retired for health reasons several years ago said she was making about \$30,000 a year before taking a lower-paying state job handling Medicaid and food stamp eligibility claims because it was closer to her home in far northwest Georgia.

She has had knee replacement surgery and long-haul COVID-19, forcing her to undergo breathing treatments and use inhalers. "I can't walk across the room without being out of breath," she said.

She gets by on less than \$1,300 a month after taxes and lives with her sister, a Tennessee civil servant, in Lookout Mountain.

"I don't go anywhere unless I have to," she said. "I don't get a lot of my medications filled unless I can cut them in half. I haven't had an eye exam in three years.

"I sit at night in the dark in my room and watch the TV."

Like a lot of state retirees, she doesn't feel the government lived up to its end of the bargain.

"The day I walked across the stage and got my badge and took my oath of office was the proudest day of my life," she said. "We paid into the retirement system. We did our time, we did what we promised. It's not like we are asking for a huge COLA for lavish trips, we just want what we were promised to meet the basics. I don't think that is too much to ask."