

Good afternoon members of the Pension Advisory Group.

My name is Ray Pouliot, and I represent NEA Rhode Island retirees, state, and municipal workers. I am also a member of the ERSRI Pension Board and vice chairperson of the Rhode Island Public Employees Retiree Coalition (RIPERC) of which NEA Rhode Island Retired is a member. I taught social studies in the East Greenwich School system for 35 years.

We have submitted some suggestions to help retirees of ERSRI and we concur with the testimony that you heard on November 30th from other groups encompassing both active and retirees. There need to be corrections made in both areas.

The pension discussion has been one of numbers and dollars, however, it is primarily a story about people. As you look around this auditorium, you will see people who have some personal stories as a result of the pension change enacted in 2011. I believe that you will hear many of these today. I am one of those people.

You will probably hear testimony from several witnesses today that is like mine. But I think that I have a slightly different perspective in some areas.

You may or not know that approximately one half of the teachers in Rhode Island do not have Social Security because their municipal government decided not to participate in the program. Now take us to 2011 and part of the discussion was – if we suspend the COLA, they still have Social Security. Not for a good number of pension recipients including me.

Another area that I would like to mention, and I am sure that this will be repeated many times today. Will I live long enough to collect the COLA in 2030 or 2031?

Well, I can testify with personal knowledge that some people will not. Since 2012. I have had several personal friends who have passed away. This year I lost my wife and best friend. My wife, Mary Jo died this past July from breast cancer. She started teaching in 1968 making under \$6000.00 a year, but she had a **promised pension**. She taught seventh and eighth graders in Smithfield. One of the communities that would eventually vote not to participate in Social Security. But she had a **promised pension**. She went to work and rarely took time out only due to illness or to attend family funerals. She taught for 35 years and then retired with her **promised pension**. That **promised pension** with a COLA lasted for eight years. She as other retirees did nothing wrong. She went to work and paid into the retirement system with the understanding that she would be able to live with dignity and be able to afford a comfortable retirement. She did not make the decisions to weaken the pension system.

Before and after the passage of the Pension Reform Act, Mary Jo participated on behalf of NEARI Retirees in many meetings to discuss how to deal with the proposed legislation and the Enacted legislation. She participated in the discussions with the state in what would become the settlement agreement. Was she happy with the settlement? No, but at the time it seemed the best that could be done. The courts said that the **promised pension** was not really

promised. What a surprise to Mary Jo and all the retirees. She and others realized that returning to the pre-Pension Reform COLA would be very expensive and would slow down the goal of reaching 80% funding by 2031. However, some substantial relief is needed. A cost-of-living adjustment is supposed to match or come close to the actual increase in cost of living. The COLAs in the years since 2011 when retirees have received one are too insignificant to help meet the actual increases in the cost of living.

Also, what those decisions of no social security and no increase in the cost of living did to retirees was to place them with a fixed income at a time when a good portion of their income is for medical expenses.

I would like to mention another area. The Pension Board of ERSRI, is asked every month to approve the number of ERSRI members who are working post retirement. One area that I pay special attention to is education. Teachers are leaving the profession, and school districts are hiring more and more retirees to teach who do not contribute into the pension system. Many, if not all of those positions should be filled with younger educators who would be making contributions to the pension system. Also, in my opinion, a school should be filled with a mixture of various ages and experiences of educators. I believe that this makes for the best educational setting for students, parents, teachers, and staff.

So, in conclusion,

Please listen and respond to the recommendations that will treat ERSRI retirees with the financial corrections that they need to live a life without fear of being destitute. Where active members can look forward to a retirement before they are too old to enjoy one.

It is time to treat public employees with the respect and the pension that they deserve. During the pandemic firefighters and police still ran toward danger, not away from it. Hospital workers went to work taking care of the sick. State workers conducted tests of citizens to try and make them safe. Municipal workers continued to administer to the needs of citizens in the cities and towns where they worked. Teachers had to change the way they taught practically overnight. Retirees were asked to volunteer wherever they were needed. The citizens of Rhode Island where well served during this time with dignity and care. There was praise for how members of ERSRI handled themselves during the pandemic.

Now we are asking to be treated with dignity and care. Thank you.