



## Doug retiree battles on to keep BellTel benefits

By Rich Bockmann

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When Eileen Lawrence retired from her job at NYNEX in 1990, things were much different from when she started 37 years earlier.

For starters, in 1953 the company she went to work for as a stenographer was called the New York Telephone Co., and in the business climate of the time there existed a different social contract.

“It was sold to us as a family concept — that’s the way business was at the time,” said the 30-year Douglaston resident. “There was security. The pay was not as good, but what you worked for was the benefits.”

Lawrence said she and her co-workers dedicated themselves to their jobs, making sacrifices and working long hours in the belief that the pensions and health care they were promised would be available for them when they retired.

“We were like the post office. During snowstorms or other crises, we had to be there,” she recalled. “We really did believe our pension increases would go up with the cost of living.”

But Lawrence said that soon after she retired, she and her fellow retirees failed to receive their cost-of-living adjustments, and in 1997 she joined the Association of BellTel Retirees, an organization that advocates for the more than 230,000 union and management retirees of Bell Atlantic, NYNEX, GTE, MCI, Idearc and Verizon.

“They just kept buying up companies and merging until it is what it is now,” she said, referring to the alphabet soup of companies the association represents. The group celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, and Lawrence said attendance at the annual retiree gathering is still strong.

“You have to understand we keep aging and people keep showing up,” she joked.

In the past 15 years, the organization has fought to gain increases for retirees, and in 2000 it achieved a lump sum pension payment of up to \$20,000 for tens of thousands of retirees, including Lawrence.

Through its lobbying partner, [protectseniors.org](http://protectseniors.org), the association is supporting a bill in Congress that would prevent a company from reducing or terminating a retiree’s healthcare benefits.

U.S. Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-Bayside) is a co-sponsor of the bill.

Lawrence, who said her Social Security checks do not come with a cost-of-living increase this year, still continues to work with the association to cut a better deal for current and future retirees.

“We maintained we earned these,” she said. “It’s like beating up on a person in a wheelchair.”

“Critics have wrongly portrayed America’s retirees as greedy for wanting the benefits they earned by forgoing higher wages and paid time off over 20-, 30-, 40-year careers,” William Jones, president and co-founder of the association, said in a statement. “As activists trained by Ma Bell, we are not taking this sitting down and so we are arming retirees with the tools to fight back.”

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Eileen Lawrence (r.), with U.S. Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) (second from l.), lobby on Capitol Hill for passage of legislation to protect earned retiree health benefits. Photo courtesy Association of BellTel Retirees



Douglaston resident Eileen Lawrence advocates for retiree rights. Photo courtesy Association of BellTel Retirees

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