BellTel Retirees Score Key Ally In U.S. Supreme Court Case

A major ally was secured in the Association of BellTel Retirees United States Supreme Court legal challenge against Verizon over its jettisoning of 41,000 management retirees out of its federally protected pension plan and the company’s use of $1 billion in pension funds to pay non-related expenses.

The Washington, D.C.-based Pension Rights Center, a national non-profit advocacy organization focused on protecting retirement security, has filed a “friend of the court” or amicus curiae brief, supporting the Association’s litigation against Verizon, which is now being considered for a hearing by the High Court.

The center, an influential voice for retirees for over 40 years, argued that the plaintiffs in the case – Pundt v. Verizon – should have the right to complain about mismanagement of their pension funds and seek civil enforcement against Verizon under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA). Lower courts have found that plan participants must prove they have already suffered individual financial harm before they have standing to seek action.

“In the context of defined benefit pension plans, this could mean that participants could not seek redress for fiduciary mismanagement until they have been deprived of their benefits,” the Center wrote in its filing, “at which point it would almost certainly be too late because the statute of limitations would have run out.”

Having the support of the Pension Rights Center adds weight to the case and indicates that the stakes are larger than just the assets of the 41,000 retirees who are a party to the suit.

(Continued to page 9)

Association Pushes Feds On Pension Fiduciary Conflict Rule

The Association of BellTel Retirees has added its voice to the important effort to crack down on pension fiduciaries’ conflicts of interest. In a letter to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the Association has thrown its support behind an effort to tighten rules on those who serve as fiduciaries, to ensure they are obligated to put the best interests of clients ahead of their own profits.

The White House Council of Economic Advisers determined that conflicts of interest among investment advisors directly lead to about 1 percentage point in annual losses for retirement savers, costing about $17 billion per year. The Council also calculates that an individual could lose an astonishing 25 percent of his or her savings over the course of 35 years.

“We believe that those entrusted with a fiduciary responsibility should owe the highest debt of trust and confidence to the principal they represent and no other,” BellTel President and Executive Director John Brennan and Board Chairman Jack C. Cohen wrote to the Department of Labor.

(Continued to page 5)
President’s Message
By John “Jack” Brennan

To all my fellow Verizon retirees let me state clearly that 2016 will be a very remarkable year for all of us. I’ll explain.

Springtime in New York: On April 19 we will be holding the Association’s 20th annual member meeting in Tarrytown just a short trip from New York City, Southern Connecticut, Northern New Jersey and the entire Hudson Valley. We selected this location due to its close proximity to thousands of our members. If you have not been to one of these wonderful gatherings before, 2016 is a perfect time to start.

Let me put this annual reunion and member meeting in perspective. We regularly achieve crowds of 200 to 500 retirees and spouses, many of whom join us the evening before the event to catch up with old colleagues with whom we worked shoulder-to-shoulder during what some consider the best years of our lives. Recapturing that old camaraderie is truly magical.

For two decades now we have held this event in a rotating list of states in close proximity to where our retirees live, because we want and need your active involvement and participation. We’ve taken this important annual event to Delaware, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and are delighted to return again to New York.

We have some members who have attended every single meeting regardless of location, plus other familiar faces that rarely miss it. On page 4 are instructions on how to RSVP and I enthusiastically hope to see all of you who can make it.

12th Time a Charm: Eleven times your Association has challenged the corporate excesses at Verizon and won. We have done this successfully via the annual shareowner proxy ballot and we will do it again in 2016.

The idea to leverage our collective shareowner rights evolved after our first year in existence, when NYNEX’s CEO refused to recognize the Association as an advocate for 3,000 retirees who signed a petition demanding a COLA that was guaranteed in their working years. Then the lightbulb went on... The company CEO could not duck out on responding to shareowners, so the Association became a NYNEX, then Bell Atlantic and eventually a Verizon stock owner!

In 2016 we are petitioning shareowners to close a rather new loophole that once again allows excessive executive golden parachutes. The fact is, we have fought the company multiple times over excessive bonuses, compensation and golden goodbyes and won. Time after time the company agrees to change their ways, only to find a new loophole. See article on page 3.

Standing at the Highest Court in America: Over several years our federal litigation has sought to confront Verizon over the way it spun off the pensions of 41,000 retirees and may do the same to thousands more in the near future. In the coming months we expect to hear more about our pension spinoff litigation (Pundt —vs – Verizon) now in the hands of the United States Supreme Court.

Let me repeat that: Your Association led litigation to protect all of our fellow retirees’ pensions. This case is now being reviewed and considered by the nine justices of the highest court in America!

Saying that takes my breath away, considering the volume and magnitude of legal work and accomplishment it took just to get there. And to say that our doggedness has confounded the company and the U.S. employee benefits industry is an understatement.

My Appeal: As I began, this is a very remarkable year for all of us. We are not just going through the motions but fighting tooth and nail for you. Each of these and other critical strategies are powered by your donations. While Verizon has an unlimited ability to spend, we do not. Please be generous in supporting the actions of the Association of BellTel Retirees today.

OUR MISSION:

The Association of BellTel Retirees Inc. is dedicated to promoting the protection and enhancement of the pensions and benefits for all retirees and beneficiaries of the companies and subsidiaries that make up the Verizon and Idearc/SuperMedia/DexMedia Corporations.

The Association will convince the company to properly care for its thousands of dedicated former union and management employees.

The Association will conduct activities designed to educate elected federal, state and local representatives and promote the passage of legislation which will protect and guarantee, rather than invade our hard-earned pension and benefits fund.

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PROXY 2016: Retirees Fight Against Even More Verizon Executive Golden Parachutes

Verizon retiree leaders are waging a proxy challenge to an accounting gymnastics loophole in the mega telecom’s “golden parachute” rule. This rule allows Verizon’s CEO and other top executives to walk away with multi-million dollar termination payouts as high as $37 million.

Association of BellTel Retirees Chairman Jack Cohen has introduced a proposal for Verizon’s 2016 proxy statement that will require the company to seek shareholder approval for any new or renewed executive severance payment exceeding three times the executive’s base salary, plus short term bonus.

This formula was proposed and approved by 59% of Verizon shareholders in 2003, but when Verizon’s Board implemented that, it left a loophole excluding the accelerated vesting of unearned performance stock units (PSUs) and restricted stock (RSUs).

Since long-term equity represents the lion’s share of executive compensation at Verizon today, even golden parachutes worth six or seven times salary plus bonus would not trigger the company shareholder approval requirement.

Under the current compensation guidelines, if CEO Lowell McAdam is terminated without cause – regardless of whether there is a change in control of the corporation - he can receive nearly seven times his base salary plus short-term bonus. Based upon Verizon’s 2015 Proxy Statement earnings disclosures, Mr. McAdam could receive an estimated $37.2 million in termination payments.

“We believe that Verizon’s severance approval policy must be based on the total cost of the termination payments to shareholders,” said Mr. Cohen. “This retiree proposal closes a loophole that would allow millions in termination payments without the required shareholder approval. In effect, the loophole circumvents the intent of the policy shareholders overwhelmingly adopted in 2003 when retirees introduced the governance change.”

In 2015, a nearly identical proposal, also sponsored by Mr. Cohen, received nearly 35% support. Mr. Cohen said, “We are going back again and this year we are looking for victory.”

“The Association of BellTel Retirees has achieved what no other group has with its frequent proxy campaign wins,” said BellTel President Jack Brennan. “Executive severance must be subject to standards of scrutiny. We are confident that responsible shareholders will agree.”

Verizon’s annual meeting is in early May 2016. At the time of this writing, the actual date and location have not been announced.

When you receive your 2016 Verizon shareholder proxy information we ask you to WAIT for a letter or an email from the Association that will give our recommendations for voting.

You will receive the annual report, proxy statement and balance sheet BEFORE you hear from us. Please be patient. We will not know the name and number assigned to the Verizon retiree proxy proposals until we receive this information from the company.

We will need that information to finalize our letter, print it and mail it to you. There is no rush to vote as you will have plenty of time to send in your ballot after you receive our letter.

Those who are signed up for our email bulletin service will receive this information first, then members receiving via U.S. mail will receive the information a week or more thereafter.

Please make sure to vote this proxy season.

Retirees’ Impact IRS Ruling

In mid-December the Association of BellTel Retirees issued a request to our members alerting them about a proposed new IRS rule that would require all charities, be it a church, hospital, food pantry or even our Association to compel all donors making a contribution of $250 or more to supply their Social Security number. To anyone fearful about identity theft, this was concerning, so we asked our members to raise their voices and explain to the IRS the chilling negative impact that this might have.

Well, on January 7th the federal government heard our voices and published the following notice:

“A wave of complaints forced the IRS on Thursday to withdraw its controversial plan to have nonprofit charities report the Social Security numbers of donors who give just $250 in any given year.”

This is magnificent news, but of greater significance is that it should prove to all of us that mountains would be moved if enough people make their voices heard loud and clear. There were over 37,000 comments submitted to the IRS including 786 from our own membership. This avalanche upon the IRS made the federal department sit up and take notice.

Our members need to look at this in a positive way and recognize what can be accomplished when we all have motivation to act swiftly. Let’s use this as a springboard in the coming weeks. We will be asking you to call your Members of Congress and/or State Legislators to take action, or simply press a button and send an email relating to our issues.

Just imagine what else can be accomplished in 2016 if all of our members take action. You can see from what happened with the IRS that it works.
The Association of BellTel Retirees is celebrating its 20th anniversary in Tarrytown, New York with a meeting at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel located at 455 South Broadway on Tuesday, April 19, beginning at 8 a.m.

Members will get the chance to catch up with old friends and colleagues, speak with Association board members and hear from and speak to the Association’s legal team about our ongoing federal litigation and also about our efforts to fight back against pension de-risking and much more.

We urge everyone to mark their calendar and make it a priority to attend the meeting. For those who live in the New York - New Jersey - Connecticut Metropolitan region, the hotel is less than an hour away by car or the MTA Metro North Railroad from New York City and it is the first exit off the Tappan Zee Bridge in Westchester County. It is also just minutes off of Interstate 95 and is easily accessible from all major highways. For those interested in coming via Metro North, the hotel is offering shuttle service, given advance notice of arrival time.

Tarrytown, the backdrop for Washington Irving’s famous “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is home to many of the Industrial Age mansions overlooking the scenic Hudson River. Nearby, you will be able to visit the Empire Casino at Yonkers Raceway; Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate; Lyndhurst Castle, and so much more. The Doubletree hotel is about an hour south of West Point and some of the Hudson Valley’s many wineries.

Our last annual meeting in Tarrytown was back in 2010 and over 300 members attended. It was a great meeting, and we hope just as many of you and your spouses will be a part of this major event.

The hotel is offering the Association of BellTel Retirees members a special room rate of $137 dollars for those who wish to stay overnight. Use code ABR when booking.

RSVP for Association of BellTel Retirees Annual Meeting
Tuesday, April 19, 2016 at The Double Tree Hilton, 455 S. Broadway, Tarrytown, New York

A Ticket Is Required To Attend

I will attend the meeting in Tarrytown, NY - # in party_____

Name:_________________________ Address:_____________________________________________________

Phone Number:_____________ Email Address:_______________________________________

Enclosed is a Check for $__________ ($5.00 per person)

Please list your guest’s names and addresses:
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY
(You can list invitees names on a separate piece of paper if more than 2 are attending)

A ticket will be mailed to each member and guest for admission.
Please return this registration form and fee ASAP to: Association of BellTel Retirees Inc.
c/o Susan Donegan / P.O. Box 33, Cold Spring Harbor, NY 11724
Don’t Get Caught By Medical Claims’ Fine Print

By Jack Cohen

I’ve been married to my wife Ilene for 49 years. She’s a lot healthier than I am. Longevity in her family is amazing. That is why I was so shocked when we received a notice of denial of payment for her annual physical, resulting in a $400 bill.

She is part of the Medicare Advantage Plan and is Medicare eligible. The reason we were given for the denial was “The maximum benefit has been exhausted.” We received this a month after her exam, which she had on August 13, 2015. She had only filed a total of six claims for medical visits during the first eight months of 2015, of which our insurance paid $436.95, or 19.2%, of what was submitted. How could that possibly be exhausting the maximum benefit?

The denial came with instructions on how to file an appeal through various insurance companies and our appeal ultimately became an appeal to Medicare. I supplied all supporting documentation on each visit placed where a claim was filed in 2015.

On December 3rd I received notice that the denial had been reversed and I would be refunded the payment I had made. I received that payment on December 24th…Merry Christmas.

It turns out the issue was that the annual physical must not occur within the calendar year after the last physical. My wife had actually taken her physical one week earlier in August 2014 than she did in August 2015, meaning it was not within a calendar year!

The problem was that the provider somehow transposed it to show that she had taken the 2015 physical earlier than she actually did. The take away is that if you are one day short of a full calendar year, you likewise are in jeopardy of “exhausting your maximum benefit.”

One full year must pass before taking your physical, which really means “one year plus.” It is no longer an annual physical. It becomes an “annual plus” physical.

The moral of the story is that we should never take these denials at face value. If you maintain good records and appropriately challenge the denial, you can win.

Association Pushes Feds On Pension Fiduciary Conflict Rule

(Continued from page 1)

“Fiduciaries cannot serve two masters, and given significant transgressions, especially against older savers, the only way retirees can have greater certainty is with a new and more stringent standard and set of rules proposed by the DOL for investment managers and advisors.”

Financial managers with control over retirement savings are often paid fees and commissions to steer clients’ money into certain funds or investment vehicles. Currently, they operate under an uncertain patchwork of regulations and disclosure requirements. In many instances, managers do not have to tell clients they are also being paid by the investment funds to which they steer the assets.

“(Financial advisers) can get paid a lot more money to sell one product over another and there’s just a ton of conflicts of interest and a lot of hidden fees,” Ron Rhoades, a professor of finance at Western Kentucky University, told Bloomberg News. “Having a conflict of interest is a breach of fiduciary duty. You have to cure that breach.”

The Association urged the DOL to adopt a set of proposals that would increase transparency and expand the number of investment managers bound by strict conflict of interest rules. Those subject to the tougher conflict of interest regulations are required to always prioritize the interests of clients over their own profits.

Just as importantly, Mr. Brennan and Mr. Cohen tied the need to tighten rules on fiduciaries to the actions taken by Verizon when it transferred some $8.5 billion in assets from 41,000 retirees to a third-party insurance entity without consulting or informing the retirees themselves. This is precisely the type of occurrence that the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) is meant to guard against.

“We are gravely concerned with fiduciaries that unilaterally and significantly alter the way that earned defined benefit pensions are managed and administered,” they wrote.

Was the action of Verizon as fiduciary proper in the case of 41,000 retirees, transferring $7.5 billion in retiree pension assets, plus another $1 billion for expenses to Prudential? How might that impact the remaining tens of thousands of retirees, including the many retired union members and others still under the Verizon pension umbrella? In what ways does that transfer negatively impact their future and the future of their families?

As the federal agency considers tougher rules on how fiduciaries make decisions about retirement assets, the 41,000 retiree pensions that were transferred are now subject to far less stringent and consistent rules than they enjoyed under ERISA and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation.

The Association is currently pursuing litigation against Verizon, (Pundt v. Verizon), over this action and the U.S. Supreme Court is now considering hearing the case.

At the same time, our sister organization, ProtectSeniors.Org, is working in Congress to pass legislation that would affect companies’ ability to cut or eliminate earned benefits for retirees. That bipartisan legislation, the Employee Benefits Protection Act, H.R. 1856, has been introduced by U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter (NY-25).

What all this reflects is that your Association is actively advocating on your behalf with not one, but all three branches of the federal government: The Executive, Judiciary and Legislative. These issues are all of pressing importance to all retirees and we will remain on the forefront of fighting to protect, preserve and defend your retirement benefits.
BellTel History of

In our Winter edition, we looked back at the Association’s earliest years, (1996-1999), chronicling our seven founders and their mission to hold our former employers accountable for commitments made in our working years. Over the next five years (2000-2005), the Association truly flourished by winning its first historic proxy campaigns to change Verizon’s bylaws, gaining national exposure and prominence, and

in 2000 surpassed 100,000 members.

As the new millennium began, the Association won important victories for pre-1995 retirees, campaigning for and earning lump sum COLA payments as well as an increase to the minimum pension payments. The Association waded into national policy by drafting federal legislation to prevent corporations from cancelling and reducing retiree health benefits. The bill, the Emergency Retiree Health Benefits Protection Act (HR 1322), was introduced into Congress in 2000 and by the next year had 58 sponsors, prompting corporations to launch an all-out campaign against it.

Successful Shareholder Proxy Campaigns

As it kept an eye on the halls of Congress, the Association was busy making huge strides in sponsoring shareholder proxies that garnered an amazing 1.5 billion shareholder votes. Momentum steadily increased.

An initial proxy to limit future executive “golden parachutes” received 32 percent of the vote and in 2002 the Association shocked Wall Street by winning 42.7% of shareholder proxy votes with its Calculation of Incentive Compensation Proxy, also known as “shadow profits.” That retiree proxy proposal would bar the company from including the earnings from the retirees’ then $55 billion pension fund as net income when calculating officers’ incentive pay.

As the Association racked up impressive victories in its proxy fights and its membership continued to grow and make noise, it was featured prominently in prestigious and widely read publications like Fortune and Time Magazine, Business Week, Crain’s New York Business and more.

In 2002, New Jersey retiree Jack Brennan became the Chairman of the Association, which he still serves today as President.

The next year was a truly remarkable one for the Association. Building on its success, the Association won not one but two proxies against Verizon, an unprecedented achievement. The golden parachutes proxy won with 59% of shareholder votes, while our proxy on shadow profits was accepted and adopted by the company’s board after its near victory the previous year.

“This was a historic win, the first time that either a NYNEX, Bell Atlantic, Verizon or Bell System shareholder proposal was won over the objections of the company,” said then-Association President C. William Jones.

Coming off the success of the proxies, the Association leaders were invited to meet with the COO and Deputy Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Ruben King-Shaw Jr., and to Cornell University’s school of Industrial and Labor Relations to participate in a seminar on healthcare. Mr. Shaw said, “None is more central to the future of our great nation as the strengthening of the American healthcare finance and delivery system through reengineering of the Medicare and Medicaid programs.”

Sadly, in 2004 we lost Michael Gordon, the Association’s legal counsel and one of the original drafters of the ERISA law. Mr. Gordon was a major contributor to the drafting of H.R. 1322 and...
former Chairman of the Pension Rights Center.

**Membership Passes 100,000**

Even as it bid goodbye to a great champion, the Association marked a very significant and impressive milestone: Its membership in 2004 surpassed the 100,000 mark. It was quite a voyage for a group that had begun less than 10 years earlier with a membership of only seven NYNEX retirees. The 100,000th and 100,001st members were a Virginia couple, Luther Becraft—a retired C&P telephone employee—and Margaret Becraft, who worked for South Western Bell and later C&P.

“I think it is wonderful that the Association has that many members that are ready to fight for our interest,” Ms. Becraft told the Association at the time, “It is very surprising that we ended up being the 100,000th members to join. What a stroke of luck. When we retired, we felt like the world forgot about us and there was nobody looking out for our interests. Now we are part of a group that looks out for each other and is always in your corner.”

With its membership reaching new heights, the Association’s leaders were busier than ever.

**Fighting Golden Parachutes**

Thanks to its growing army of supporters, the Association achieved another proxy bylaw change at Verizon in 2004. The company agreed to the terms of an Association proxy that severance agreements more than 2.99 times an executive’s base salary and bonus, would require the pre-approval of shareholders. The change coincided with Verizon’s listing on the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

In 2005, under threat of another retiree proxy battle, Verizon agreed to rein in Supplemental Executive Retirement Plan (SERP) income for executives. So it was only fitting that the Association was awarded the prestigious National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare’s Salute to Aging Award, which recognized America’s top retiree activists committed to enhancing the quality of life for seniors and their families.

The Association continued to grow its efforts and network with other groups, traveling to Washington, D.C. to meet with the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare.

In the next few issues, we will continue to reflect on the Association’s proud and accomplished history. We ask that you please also share some stories about your years at the company or in retirement with us. Please write or email us your favorite memories or share them with us on Facebook. We look forward to hearing them.

Thank you for being part of our history and success.

In our next issue we will look back at the years 2006-2010.
Why Retirees Should Picket

By: Mike McFadden, Southern Rep, IBEW Local 827 Retired

Since August 2015, Verizon workers from the unions IBEW and CWA have been working without a contract.

Retirees from IBEW Local 827 of New Jersey have been participating in active weekly pickets across the state to help achieve a new contract for these workers and their families.

Lately, mostly due to the weather, fewer retirees have been coming out to the Wednesday pickets, though our numbers in the Southern Division of our local in NJ are still very good. At the end of January, even with cold, damp weather, we still had very good turn out.

I think it is great that there are so many people coming out regularly and that so many of our retirees have been able to renew old acquaintances from our working days. One person told me that she and her husband look forward to coming out; even though her husband never worked with us, he has met new people with common interests and they have become friends. Other passersby also stop to chat or offer a “thumbs up.”

Even when we get a good turnout, we are still a long way from our potential, as there are hundreds of retirees in the Southern Division, which includes Burlington, Gloucester, Atlantic, Camden, Salem, Cape May and parts of Ocean counties.

It occurred to me recently that perhaps a lot of retirees do not realize exactly what is at stake for us if the company gets its way with its current proposals for retirees.

These proposals would have an adverse impact on retirees’ future financial well-being and quite possibly the quality of our medical care. Ultimately, the consequence of most of the current proposals pale in comparison to the company’s push to no longer negotiate with the union for their retirees.

Having witnessed takeaways suffered by non-union retirees, I am working very hard – along with so many other retired brothers and sisters - to preserve our right to be represented. I understand that many of you can’t join us but perhaps you can help out in some other way.

Please stay informed and realize what is at stake for you and your family. Think about what would happen without our union.

You can find details on where to picket by contacting IBEW Local 827 headquarters at 609-443-4100 or www.ibew827.com.

Stay strong, stay positive and stay informed.

ProtectSeniors.Org
www.protectseniors.org

We are fighting to keep our earned retirement benefits secure:

- HEALTHCARE
- PENSIONS
- SOCIAL SECURITY
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Donate Today to: ProtectSeniors.Org, P.O. Box 476, Cold Spring Harbor, NY 11724
We appreciate your financial and grassroots support.

ProtectSeniors.Org is a 501(c)4 organization. Contributions are NOT tax deductible.

Paid for by ProtectSeniors.Org
BellTel Retirees’ U.S. Supreme Court Case
continued from page 1

“Resolution of the issues in this case is enormously important, as it potentially affects the retirement income security of millions of plan participants,” the Center said.

With the pensions of tens of thousands of Verizon retirees, including union members, still directly managed by the pension plan, the outcome of the litigation will have wide-ranging, national effects.

“It is incredibly significant that our case has reached such important legal heights and now sits on the doorstep of the Supreme Court, which has final say on all matters it takes up,” said BellTel President and Executive Director John Brennan. “Very few cases ever make it this far.”

If the highest court in the nation accepts the case and the Association obtains a favorable ruling, it will empower retirees to hold fiduciaries more accountable for their decisions, far beyond what they are now able to do. It is another crucial front in the battle against Verizon’s attempts to limit or completely cut its responsibility to its retirees.

The Association is represented by ERISA law sharpshooter Curtis Kennedy, who has also served as keynote speaker at several annual BellTel member meetings.

How Do We Afford That?

The Association is already quite busy in 2016, with a lawsuit pending before the U.S. Supreme Court, (Pundt v. Verizon) seeking the right of retirees to argue legally about the mismanagement of their pension assets, before it’s too late. How do we pay for that?

Again in 2016, we have another shareowner proxy to close a loophole and limit golden parachutes for executives. Throughout our history we have 11 proxy wins. Again, how do we pay for that?

We are having a meeting in Washington, D.C. with the head of the Pension Benefits Guaranty Corporation over concerns about pension de-risking. We have also asked the U.S. Department of Labor to tighten fiduciary conflict of interest regulations that would stop pension managers from having conflicts of interests harmful to all retirees. How do we pay for that?

Our Association also supports ProtectSeniors.Org, which is successfully drafting and passing legislation in the states and on Capitol Hill to protect retirees’ earned pensions and benefits.

Once again, how do we pay for all of this activity?

It’s a great question. It starts with over 12,000 annual volunteer hours, the support of a loyal team of professionals and your member contributions.

Last year, both total donations and the number of contributions were down, although the average donation was up. Still, this did not come close to covering our costs to effectively wage these many necessary campaigns.

We need your financial support today more than ever. Please help us carry on the fight.
Retiree Spotlight: Part-Time H.S. Job Becomes Life’s “Calling”

A  ll her life, Audrey Niecpiel has been a person of action. Some people are talkers, speaking of things they wish they could change; others are doers, fighting the good fight to make those changes take place. Audrey has always been a fighter, seizing every opportunity to make things better.

Even as a teenager, the former Audrey Nowak was the proactive type. In 1954, the high school senior from Buffalo, N.Y., had earned enough credits to attend school for only half a day. Not content to simply waste the extra time as others her age might, she and a friend applied for jobs at New York Telephone, where she was hired as an operator, working half days while finishing school. She spent three years as an operator before taking time off to have a family. She and her husband Walter, who worked for General Mills, raised three children.

After six more years, determined to own a home, Audrey went back to work to realize that dream sooner. She went on to a successful and diverse career at NY Telephone, spending time as an operator, in the plant department in records and payroll. She also worked in the residential and benefits departments before completing her career in 1991 as an order writer.

“I was so proud to be a part of the company when they treated you like family,” Audrey said. “If you worked hard you were rewarded.” She remembers a charm bracelet given to operators for good customer service, with each charm representing a different milestone achieved.

One of her most significant memories was being tasked with changing the directory listings for the University of Buffalo. Since no master list existed, she had to create it from scratch, a massive undertaking that ultimately succeeded and earned an award.

In 1991, Audrey opted to retire early. Her husband, Walter, was also up for retirement and they decided to retire together so they could travel and babysit their four grandchildren.

Having no regrets about early retirement, Audrey said it is not without its challenges. She shared that when her husband retired, he joked that he didn’t think he would make it to 75, and is now into his 80s. He has been struggling with diabetes for the last 25 years and she helps care for him.

To that end, health care is among Audrey’s biggest concerns. She finds it unfair that companies try to change the rules by forcing retirees to pay into health plans they had been told were already earned and paid for. These unexpected costs wreak havoc with the budgets of seniors living on fixed incomes.

“It’s like they are punishing us for being healthy and living longer,” Audrey said. “We made the company what it is today.”

It wasn’t always this way. Among Audrey’s most meaningful experiences at the company was working in the benefits department. She recalled the caring and respectful way retirees were treated.

That changed as the years went by. In 1990, workers went on strike during contract negotiations when the company wanted to cut the Medicare cap in half. Audrey stood up in the union meeting and told her fellow members to think about their benefits and how they were at risk. Back then, she was brushed off, but boy, did her predictions prove accurate!

“Things fell apart since then, and now what’s happening is criminal,” she said. “After 1991 retirees had to pay into their health insurance. This was an expense they didn’t plan on. We expected to have exactly what we had when we were working.”

Audrey has maintained her interest in fighting for retiree rights. After hearing about the success of ProtectSeniors.org in passing de-risking protection legislation into law in Connecticut, she wrote to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, personally asking him to help New York protect its retirees.

“We are fed up with the corporate greed and de-risking,” she said. “If we have to fix this problem state by state, that’s what we are going to do. If my letter gets even one more person to reach out to public officials it’s worth it. We can’t sit back and expect the Association of BellTel Retirees to do all the work. People need to speak up and participate.”

With these concerns in the front of her mind, Audrey Niecpiel is an avid supporter of The Association of BellTel Retirees. As a member, she often shares copies of the newsletters with her old colleagues and keeps them informed about issues. She also appreciates the retiree proxy victories the Association has won, giving them a greater voice in the company.

“I feel so lucky to have them watching my back and sticking up for us,” Audrey said. Do you have a story to share? Let us know.
By Bill Jones

On the morning of January 6, 2016, I made my second visit to the GTE/Verizon Breakfast Group in Grapevine, Texas. No, I did not travel from Long Island, New York or from Easton, Maryland. I moved to Frisco, Texas in 2013. The breakfast group meets almost every Wednesday morning at the Waffle Way, 1206 West Northwest Highway, Grapevine, Texas.

I knew about this group because a member, Roger Gallenstein, a GTE retiree and member of the Association of BellTel Retirees and ProtectSeniors.Org, has for many years kept me up-to-date on news about retirees and, specifically, about GTE/Verizon retiree news in Texas.

Roger has been attending the breakfasts at the Waffle Way since 2004. The group’s current leader, John Jensik, has an email list of about 150 potential breakfast attendees from all over the globe who occasionally drop in for breakfast. For instance, for the last three weeks, Duke Tracy has been to the breakfast and he lives in Oregon! Another attendee, Jeff Lapatra, who attended on 12/30, has a farm in Greenville, Texas and lives in Irving, Texas.

The group is eclectic and discusses all sorts of news about the telephone industry, fishing, religion, politics, medical coverage, love, marriage, or whatever comes up. Someday, perhaps one of the members will write a story about what happens in a Texas diner when a bunch of old friends get together for breakfast.

Finally, I want to thank Roger, Ralph Mayfield, Ed Beauvais, Becky Munsell, Claudia Hauft, Dennis (Spike) Murawski, Ken McMillan, John Jensik, Duke Tracy, Bill Manning, John Rollins and Vic Kleiss for their hospitality and hope to visit the GTE/Verizon Breakfast Group again in the near future.

If you are ever in Grapevine, Texas on a Wednesday morning at 9:00, remote as that may be, and feel like breakfast and conversation with retirees mostly from GTE and Verizon, you’ll feel free to drop into the Waffle Way.

On January 15, 2016, Board Members John Hyland and Jack Cohen met with a retiree club from Putnam County to discuss retiree issues at the Eveready Diner in Brewster, New York.

Help From Medicare’s New Blue Button Program

While new technology might seem intimidating at first, it can significantly simplify life for retirees in many ways. For example, there is a new program offered by Medicare called Blue Button. It allows Medicare recipients to easily download all their Medical claims data for record keeping and includes a complete list of all your medications in a simple text file. You can then bring information with you to the doctor or allow your family access to make it easier on you.

If you need help getting started, your children and grandchildren are a great resource to get you up and operational!

The Medicare Blue Button program can also help your family access your medical history if they need to fill out paperwork or for you. You can go online to Medicare.gov to access the data. The program can also be found at http://1.usa.gov/2028qbM

Likewise, over the years, the Association has grown and adapted with emerging technology. We now have Facebook and Twitter pages to converse with fellow retirees and our own YouTube video channel.

By having your email on file and by connecting with us on our social media platforms, we are able to send you the latest information, without having to wait for the traditional U.S. Mail.

Please send your email address to association@belltelretirees.org. We will not sell or share your personal information. Also, please add us to your ‘contacts’ list so our emails are not misdirected to your spam or junk folder.

If you do not want to purchase a computer, one is always available free at your local library or try a smartphone. It costs nothing to create or have an email account. Visit free services like gmail.com, yahoo.com, hotmail.com or many others to set up a free account. It is never too late to learn.
Verizon looks to sell off its data center business

Verizon plans to sell its data center business in a potential $2.5 billion deal, according to Reuters.

One source who spoke to Reuters said Verizon’s business center assets include 48 data centers, which currently generate earnings of about $275 million. Despite the fact that Verizon acquired Terremark, a data center operator, in 2011 for $1.4 billion, it is now looking to rid itself of these assets.

According to sources, Verizon was planning to sell its entire enterprise business for $10 billion, a unit that includes the former MCI, which Verizon acquired in January 2006, and also the Terremark data center business.

Other telecom companies, AT&T and CenturyLink are also looking to sell off their data center businesses. Windstream, a provider of voice and data network communications, sold its data center business to Tierpoint, a data center specialist, for $575 million last October.

Verizon offers cash incentives to change carriers

Verizon is offering up to $650 for customers to switch from one of its rivals: AT&T, Sprint or T-Mobile. This enables customers to pay off either the rest of their wireless contract or the remaining device payments owed to their current carrier.

Anyone who switches their existing number, purchases a new smartphone or trades in their old one can receive a prepaid card with up to $650 on it, depending on the value of their phone. The new customer will then pay contract termination fees out-of-pocket.

Verizon will also give customers who switch from other carriers an extra 2GB of data per month for however long they stay with Verizon.

Last year, T-Mobile began marketing and soliciting competitors’ customers by paying off its rivals’ early termination fees. Lots of customers made the switch and now Verizon and others are following suit.

Verizon’s 5G network rolls out in 2017

Verizon Communications is looking to roll out its futuristic 5G network in 2017. The company will begin testing its new network in Boston, San Francisco, and New York City following tests at its headquarters.

Verizon CEO and Chairman Mr. Lowell McAdam noted that the 5G network speeds will be up to 200 times faster than Verizon’s current 5 Mbps average speed.

The average wireless subscriber uses 2.4 GB of data per month, but by 2020 that will jump to 14 GB per month.

“What 5G is, is much more designed for video,” said McAdam. “We call it more use-case defined. It will be more point-to-point solutions.”

According to analysts, Verizon’s network traffic has been growing by 75% each year and its data traffic from video is expected to grow 55% each year over the next five years.