

A MESSAGE FOR UGA RETIREES

We have been hearing concerns of UGA retirees and some active employees since the planned changes in how healthcare insurance will be provided in 2016 became known. We want to assure you that the UGA Retiree Association (UGARA) Council and other University System of Georgia (USG) institutions are doing much to understand the proposed transition and see that this change does not affect retirees in ways that compromise accessibility to healthcare.

News of the change in the retiree healthcare benefits plan was sudden and unexpected. The resulting suspicion and distrust of the “benefits” of this change can be mainly attributed to the manner in which retirees learned about this via a newspaper article with a provocative headline. Learning that the decision to make the change in healthcare insurance was made nearly 15 months ago at the November 2013 Board of Regents (BOR) meeting was not very reassuring. What has been told to us so far is that the decision was based on an assessment that the current way of providing healthcare benefits is unsustainable because of the rising cost.

When you look elsewhere, the approved change is similar to what several other institutions have recently done and some others are planning to adopt. It is just a different way of providing insurance. The claim is that this change will give more options to retirees and reduce cost to both the retirees and USG. We don't see any evidence that will make us conclude that the USG and the BOR are backing out of providing benefits to retirees in the near future, but what level of support will be provided in future years is not clear. We believe the heightened level of concern is due to lack of timely communication with retirees and lack of transparency of the data that led to this conclusion. This has created deep suspicion and resulted in loss of trust.

The UGARA Council has been proactive in keeping UGA retirees informed via its website (<http://ugara.uga.edu>) and by supporting a Facebook page to facilitate conversation among retirees. It has communicated retirees concerns by letters to the Chancellor, UGA President and Vice Chancellor of Human Resources. UGARA has also asked to see the fiscal and statistical data that persuaded the BOR to make this change. We have requested full disclosure of the rationale for the change. UGARA has offered to put this information on its website in order to facilitate communication with retirees.

It is our understanding that the USG Human Resource (HR) Office is now coordinating with the UGA Human Resources department to arrange another information session in Athens in a much larger venue (that would have accommodated all those who came to the April 3rd meetings) to provide additional information to retirees. This time the expectations are that the presentations will include facts and figures.

Availability of good healthcare is important at all stages of life and it becomes a dominant concern as we grow older. It is therefore natural that a sudden and unexpected change has shocked retirees and shaken their trust in the system. But we don't need to panic. There is much support to see that the changes are not harmful to retirees. UGARA

Council has been closely following USG activities as well as what other USG institutions are doing about this issue. You may also know that last fall the Chancellor approved the formation of a University System of Georgia Retiree Council (USGRC), with a representative from each system institution, for the purpose of giving the USG staff and BOR members input in matters related to USG retirees. This is a very positive change as USGRC will be able to directly and regularly communicate with the USG offices in the future.

We hope this message will let you appreciate that while the healthcare changes are shocking and unsettling with the fear of the unknown, UGARA and retiree associations at other USG institution are actively engaged and speaking up to seek information that retirees rightfully need to know. We are optimistic that something good will come out of all of this chaos and we will end up in a good place.

We plan to post updated information on the UGARA website (with links on the Facebook page) as it becomes known to us. Please check these online sources often.

Brahm P. Verma, UGARA President, 2014-15

Thomas P. Lauth, Incoming UGARA President for 2105-16