

Fighting to Protect Your Benefits

By Tammy Flanagan

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This week I had the privilege of attending and presenting at the [National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association](#) biennial convention in Reno, Nevada. The theme of the convention was “Progress. Protect. Persevere.”

NARFE is 95 years old. It was founded in 1921, the year after Congress created the Civil Service Retirement System. Its current membership numbers about 222,000, but the organization represents the interests of around 5 million federal employees, retirees, their spouses and survivors.

The conference featured presentations by Harry Johns, president and chief executive officer of the Alzheimer’s Association; Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, D-N.M.; John O’Brien, director of health care and insurance at the Office of Personnel Management; and Steve Bauer, executive director of the Federal Employees Education and Assistance Fund. The convention also included more than two dozen booths staffed by representatives of six Federal Employees Health Benefits Program plans, the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program, the Social Security Administration, the Thrift Savings Plan and OPM, providing front-row access to the convention attendees to top experts from each of these agencies and programs. Nearly 1,000 people attended the event.

The conference included several sessions on efforts to work with members of Congress to protect federal retirement and other benefits. NARFE’s legislative staffers spend much of their time on Capitol Hill with senators, representatives, congressional committees and their staffs. They take a three-pronged approach, said NARFE’s legislative director, Jessica Klement:

- Professional lobbying aimed at building relationships with members of Congress.
- The NARFE political action committee, which raises funds to support the election of legislators who support the concerns of federal employees and retirees.
- Grassroots efforts by NARFE members to write letters and emails, attend town halls, visit their congressional representatives and make phone calls to let lawmakers know what’s important to them.

Klement said it’s particularly important for members of Congress to hear directly from employees and retirees. In her previous experience working on the Hill, she said, she learned that silence from constituents means acceptance.

Thanks to the efforts of employees, retirees and organizations like NARFE, retirees have suffered no recent cuts to their benefits even though reductions totaling \$318 billion were floated during the fiscal 2016 budget process. NARFE continues to be on the lookout for potential future cuts to benefits, and also supports such proposals as paid parental leave for federal employees.

In addition, NARFE helps current and future federal retirees and survivor annuitants understand their retirement and insurance benefits. The organization maintains a staff of benefits specialists to answer questions and serve as a liaison with agencies that administer benefits.

I’ve been a member of NARFE since the 1980s, when I was hired as a retirement benefits specialist at the FBI. I continue to read the organization’s monthly magazine and contribute to it occasionally. I also provide webinars for the new NARFE Federal Benefits Institute.

Through organizations like NARFE and their own efforts to call, email and visit lawmakers, federal employees and retirees can make their voices heard.

Photo: Flickr user [Ron Cogswell](#)

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<http://www.govexec.com/pay-benefits/retirement-planning/2016/09/fighting-protect-your-benefits/131219/>