

Beyond the Horror Stories

By Tammy Flanagan

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Regular readers of this column know that I'm an eternal optimist. I've been trying to find the bright side to the October government shutdown, and I think I've finally succeeded.

The Office of Personnel Management expected to receive 8,400 new retirement claims for processing in October. Possibly due to the shutdown, the agency received only 7,484 -- and the previous month it got only 5,800 instead of the anticipated 8,400. Since OPM stayed open for the most part during the shutdown, its employees continued to process more cases than they received. That cut the overall backlog of cases awaiting processing to 14,176 at the end of October. Keep in mind that OPM processes over 100,000 new claims annually.

OPM is now very near its goal of retirees receiving their first annuity payments within 60 days after the agency receives their applications -- down from 156 days at the beginning of 2012. That's when OPM unveiled a new [strategic plan for retirement services](#).

We hear horror stories of delays in retirement processing all the time, but here's a positive one. Steve, an employee who had his retirement processed through the Army Benefits Center at Ft. Riley, Kan., wanted me to share his experience to show that getting your retirement processed smoothly is a joint effort between the employee, the agency that he or she retires from and OPM.

Here's what Steve had to say:

Just want to say thank you for an easy transition to retirement. I took your class in Rock Island, Ill., about two years ago.

Asked agency for retirement estimate in March 2012 (Army Benefits Center -- civilian at Ft. Riley).

Received estimate in July 2012 -- no errors.

Submitted retirement paperwork 1 April '13.

Retired 2 August '13.

Last paycheck, including accumulated annual leave, 22 Aug '13.

First, partial-month, interim retirement check 10 Sep '13.

Second interim retirement check 1 Oct '13.

Rest of the money from first two checks 10 Oct '13.

OPM booklet with details on my retirement calculation 13 Oct '13.

So, about two months to get my retirement settled, despite the shutdown, and interim payments were plenty. I'd heard all the horror stories. Glad those didn't happen in my case. Believe the tricks are:

Check with your agency well in advance (2-3 years) to make sure they have everything correct.

Submit retirement well in advance (4 months in my case).

It probably helps that I had no break in service, no former spouse, no military buyback, and only worked for one agency (Defense, although I did work for more than one part of Defense). Just wanted to give you an example of how a simple retirement went much faster than the six months one reads about as the average.

Thanks to Steve for sharing his experience. Hopefully it will ease the minds of some employees who are planning end-of-year retirements. There will continue to be stories of processing delays, since each individual case has its own set of potential pitfalls. Don't lose sleep over this, but do be aware of a few key tips regarding retirement processing:

OPM receives three to four times the average monthly number of retirement claims in January and February. In 2013, OPM received 22,187 claims in January and 20,374 claims in February.

Be sure to submit your retirement application at least 30 days (better yet, 60-90 days) before your retirement date.

Keep in mind that your agency has other retirement cases to prepare besides yours.

Preparation of a retirement case includes a compilation of your federal career history, complete with documentation, and verification that you are eligible to continue your Federal Employee Health Benefits Program and Federal Employees Group Life Insurance coverage into retirement.

If you want an idea of the steps that are taken to process your retirement through human resources, here's the [checklist](#) agencies use to be sure they've covered all of the bases before submitting a case to OPM.

If you want even more details on how the specific retirement forms and applications are assembled by your agency for retirement processing, check out the [Benefits Administration Letter](#) OPM sent to agency benefit offices on Aug. 2, 2012.

There's one part of the letter I find amusing -- or maybe sad, considering it's 2013: "It will expedite interim pay processing if forms are 2-hole punched (on top for portrait, on the right side for landscape), do not need to be repaired and are in the order specified. If the forms are torn off the prongs of the [official personnel file], they need to be repaired before we can punch holes for the retirement case file. Also the documents should not be stapled together. Removing the staples increases assembly time and may damage the documents."

Unusual service history issues, such as part-time work, unpaid service credit deposits and unverified service can all cause extra time for processing.

Be proactive when preparing for retirement. Attend pre-retirement training if it's available, and request a retirement estimate for your specific date well ahead of your planned separation. Estimates can take weeks -- sometimes months -- to process.

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<http://www.govexec.com/pay-benefits/retirement-planning/2013/11/beyond-horror-stories/73427/>