Connection

Billy’s Banter

As the presidential elections come closer and closer the candidates are beginning to take positions on issues such as SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps). I thought it might be a good time to again write on the guidelines for SNAP.

First, by definition to receive SNAP benefits you must be a US citizen or a lawfully present non-citizen. A non-citizen must be a qualified alien in order to be eligible for SNAP. Individuals who are eligible based on their immigration status must also satisfy other eligibility requirements.

Households have to meet income tests. A household of two having a monthly net income in excess of $1,328 cannot get SNAP benefits.

The maximum benefit provided to a two person household is $357 per month. This breaks down to $178.50 per person per month or less than $6 per day.

You may ask yourself, what does this issue have to do with me? Unfortunately, with the rising cost of health coverage and loss of purchasing power for many retirees, programs like SNAP are becoming more important and necessary in their lives. According to a recent AARP article, “About 19 percent of recipients of SNAP are 60-plus, and many of them rely on SNAP because they have low fixed incomes and high medical costs.”

If we elect a candidate who thinks Social Security is a “Ponzi Scheme” or elimination of the Affordable Care Act, which has kept senior health care costs down, or that “Entitlements” like Medicare need to be reviewed and reduced, we will be depending on programs like SNAP in even greater numbers. I for one will be working hard to prevent these attacks and I hope many of you will join me this election cycle.

Bill Pienta, SOAR President

USW News Breaks Excerpts

- New Rule Will Require Companies To Disclose Anti-Union Spending - An estimated 75 percent of companies pay these consultants, often hundreds of thousands of dollars, basically to tell management what to say to discourage workers from unionizing.

- You’ve probably watched one before. An anti-union video so painfully corny, you probably had to turn it off after a few seconds. Thanks to a new transparency rule released by the Department of Labor called the "persuader rule," these firms are no longer allowed anonymity. Employees deserve to know whether these third-party union busters are being employed to influence their decision about forming a union with their co-workers.
From the Director’s Desk

Don’t Believe the Lies About Social Security

Social Security’s impending doom has been the battle cry of the right since before the first benefit check was ever cashed. These crisis calls are all too familiar:

“Social Security is bankrupt!” - “The trust fund isn’t real!” - “We have to cut benefits!”

The fact of the matter is the truth is very different. Social Security remains strong and will be able to pay full benefits until 2034. After that, there will still be enough income coming into the program to pay 79 percent of all benefits. But with an average monthly benefit of just $1,300, most beneficiaries cannot afford a 21 percent benefit cut, and that’s why Congress must pass modest reforms, as it has many times before.

Doing nothing is not an option. Raising the retirement age, cutting the cost-of-living adjustment, privatization and means testing are all benefit cut proposals touted by the anti-entitlement lobby and its supporters. They claim it’s the best ways to close Social Security’s shortfall. However you and I know the American people support an entirely different approach. Poll after poll has demonstrated that large bipartisan majorities wants to improve benefits and are willing to pay more to stabilize and strengthen the program.

There is no reason for Social Security benefit cuts that would force vulnerable Americans to bear an even greater financial burden than they already do. Social Security has never contributed one cent to the deficit. Not one cent. The fiscal woes of this nation are not due to this worker-funded program, which currently has $2.8 trillion in its trust fund.

Numerous proposals languishing in Congress would extend Social Security’s solvency while also improving benefits by lifting the payroll tax cap, adopting a cost-of-living adjustment for the elderly, expanding the minimum benefit and boosting benefits overall. These are reasonable reforms that deserve consideration.

Jim Centner, SOAR Director

In Retirement, Income Gap Worsens For Women

We know that women earn 79 cents for every dollar men earn. A new report from the Institute on Retirement Security reveals that in retirement the gap in income widens. And, over time, the retirement income gap only worsens for women. As a result, women are much more likely to suffer financially in retirement than men.

Older women live on just three-quarters of the retirement income of men. As a result, they are 80 percent more likely to be impoverished than men. And, by the time women are 80, the income gap widens, with their median income just 70 percent that of men, $26,470 to $38,040.

Women receive one third less in retirement income from a pension, $12,000, than men, $17,856. And, they save 34 percent less in their 401(k) type retirement plans, $24,446, than men, $36,875. Because they have a longer life expectancy than men, they are at greater risk of depleting all their retirement savings. On average, women receive lower Social Security benefits than men. Almost two out of three older adults living in poverty are women.

What do we do about it? The authors suggest increasing Social Security benefits for women. The authors also recommend auto-IRAs to increase retirement plan coverage, expanding use of the Saver’s Credit and state-sponsored savings plans, which could help make up for the fact that 68 million working people do not have access to a retirement plan through their jobs.

Source: Diane Archer of jus+care (excerpts)
The Three Legged Stool is in Trouble

The retirement benefit trends should be a concern for all, especially the younger workers. There has been a significant reduction in pension plans that have a set retirement benefit funded by employers, which are referred to as defined benefit plans (DB plans) that, in some cases, have been replaced with what is referred to as defined contribution plans like 401 (k) plans. This has placed all the risks on individuals.

When I began negotiating labor contracts in the mid-sixties and seventies it was common for employers to recognize the acceptance of defined benefit plans and it was widely recognized that retirement benefits were based on the three legged stool principal. That is: pension benefits, Social Security and individual savings such as a 401K or IRA etc.

Now we see the pension plan leg being attacked and certain politicians willing to attack Social Security. The stool has become unstable.

Now, only 21 percent of Americans are very confident they will ever have enough money for retirement (study by the Employee Benefit Research Institute).

And to make matters worse, the last congress passed legislation allowing multi-employer pension plans that were in financial trouble, to cut retiree benefits (Multi-employer Pension Reform Act of 2014). The “Keep Our Promises Act of 2015”, S. 1631 and H.R. 2844 would repeal this law and assure that pensioners will continue to receive their full benefits. Ask your legislators to support this legislation.

One has to wonder, what has gone so wrong? It wasn’t long ago when many pension plans where overfunded.

Bill Gibbons, PACE Representative

What are the Trust Funds?

The Social Security trust funds are financial accounts in the U.S. Treasury. There are two separate Social Security trust funds, the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) Trust Fund pays retirement and survivors benefits, and the Disability Insurance (DI) Trust Fund pays disability benefits. Social Security taxes and other income are deposited in these accounts, and Social Security benefits are paid from them. The only purposes for which these trust funds can be used are to pay benefits and program administrative costs.

The Social Security trust funds hold money not needed in the current year to pay benefits and administrative costs and, by law, invest it in special Treasury bonds that are guaranteed by the U.S. Government. A market rate of interest is paid to the trust funds on the bonds they hold, and when those bonds reach maturity or are needed to pay benefits, the Treasury redeems them.

Source: Social Security Administration
The McNeil Report

- As for old age, embrace it and love it. It abounds with pleasure, if you know how to use it.

- The gradually declining years are amongst the sweetest...and I maintain, that even where they have reached the extreme limit, they have their pleasure still.
  -Seneca

- His daily prayer, far better understood in acts than in words, was simply doing good.
  -John Greenleaf Whittier

- To get out of a difficulty, one usually must go through it.
  -Samuel Easton

- The heart of the problem is usually the problem of the heart.

- We always have time for the things we put first.

- He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help.
  -Abraham Lincoln

- District and Chapter articles and photos should be emailed to the SOAR office at the address at the left. The deadline to submit articles and photos for the SOAR in Action magazine is May 17.

Elaine Sez...

.....I woke up this morning and wished it was November 9.....election over....then Charlie turned the tv on... back to reality.

Old Charlie Sez...

.....and I dreamed it was April 5, the end of basketball season.....and then Elaine turned the T.V. on. End of dream.
Carrier, UTEC and Nabisco are Exacerbating the Retirement Security Crisis

by Robert Roach, Jr.

Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-IN) pressed Janet Yellen, Chair of the Federal Reserve, about the offshoring of jobs after Carrier and UTEC corporations announced that they will move 2,100 jobs from Indiana to Mexico. The exchange took place during a Senate Banking Committee hearing in February.

Donnelly noted that the companies took advantage of the Indiana business climate and the work of the Export-Import Bank to achieve their sales before the outsourcing. He stressed the adverse effect the move will have on the workers’ retirement security.

The Alliance has pledged to help Sen. Donnelly to achieve our shared goal of retirement security for all. We will work closely with USW President Leo W. Gerard and our brothers and sisters at USW to do that.

Part of that work will involve addressing the disappearance of defined benefit pension plans in the United States. The trend is widespread, and moving American jobs to other countries exacerbates the problem.

However, outsourcing is obviously not limited to Indiana. Last year, Nabisco announced it would invest more in its new $400 million plant in Salinas, Mexico, rather than investing that money in its iconic plant in Chicago. As a result, 600 workers in Chicago will lose their jobs and an entire community will be devastated.

The union workers at the Chicago Nabisco bakery have been producing baked goods such as Oreo and Chips Ahoy cookies and Ritz and Premium crackers for more than 50 years.

The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTMG) has created a petition to Irene Rosenfeld, CEO of Mondelēz International, to save these American jobs, and hundreds of our members have signed it. We stand with our friends at BCTMG, as we do our friends at USW.

Robert Roach, Jr. is president of the Alliance for Retired Americans. He was previously General Secretary-Treasurer of the IAMAW. For more information, visit www.retiredamericans.org.

Medicare FAQ

Are prescription drugs covered in Original Medicare?
With a few exceptions, most prescriptions aren't covered in Original Medicare. You can add drug coverage by joining a Medicare Prescription Drug Plan (Part D).

Do I have to get a referral to see a specialist?
In most cases, no. In Original Medicare, you don't need a referral, but the specialist must be enrolled in Medicare.

Do I need to choose a primary care doctor?
No, in Original Medicare you don't need to choose a primary care doctor.

Source: Medicare.gov
Report From The Alliance for American Manufacturing (AAM)

The Chinese steel surge, sending poorly-made, low-cost steel products into the United State, continues to prosper despite the fact China has vowed to cut its steel production in the next two years. China has a reputation of saying one thing and doing the opposite, so don’t hold your breath.

As we’ve pointed out before, the China steel industry is government funded making it impossible for American steel mills to compete. More than 12,000 steelworker jobs were eliminated in America in 2015 and unless our government seriously addresses this problem, things will only get worse.

U.S. Steel reported fourth-quarter losses of $1 billion in 2015 and has closed or idled operations at eight plants, including Gary, Indiana; Fairfield, Alabama and Granite City, Illinois.

ArcelorMittal, the world’s largest steelmaker with mills around the globe, lost $8 billion last year as sales dropped 20 percent. ArcelorMittal, heavily invested in American steel, is the second largest steel manufacturer in the United States. Steelworkers are constantly being laid-off at smaller American steel mills including AK Steel and Republic Steel.

Similar to the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) which builds automobiles – with the finest U.S. steel, I must say – steelworkers are making concessions in pay and benefits to revive the American mills.

But the raping of the U.S. steel industry must stop soon, before it is too late. In the halls of congress, many more U.S. Representatives are taking a second look at leveling the playing field so America can compete fairly.

It’s a global economy these days and it will not serve America well to become isolationists. American manufacturing will thrive again once our leaders in Washington, DC realize America needs a level playing field at any cost.

At AAM, we urge all USW members and the SOAR community to make that extra effort and contact your Representatives and Senators in Congress. They understand this is a serious problem to the livelihoods of hardworking Americans and retirees.

Please phone and write to your members of congress at their district offices or call the Washington, DC Capitol switchboard operator at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your member of congress or U.S. Senator.

Jeff Bonior, AAM staff writer, Alliance for American Manufacturing, (202) 695-8219

Take Up A Hobby

Have you ever planned to do some special thing but find out that it’s going to rain all day? Or maybe you are about to get a snow storm. You might wonder, what the heck am I going to do with my time. Well, if you don’t have a hobby to fall back on, maybe you should consider finding one that meets your interest or challenges you. After all, life shouldn’t be all work. We all need an “outside” interest.

I have so many hobbies that I am never bored. I have a model ship that I’ve been working on for years. I enjoy taking photos and putting this newsletter together. I’ve been writing letters for years to those unable to get out and I’m fixing to try my hand at calligraphy. An interest in roasting green coffee beans was given to me by SOAR Vice President Harry Hynd several years ago and I’ve been at it ever since. Gardening is a great hobby to get a person out doors and down and dirty. Elaine is a quilter so I seldom ever run into her. Hobbies, to each his own.

Charlie
Sanders’ And Clinton’s plans To Rein In Drug Prices, by Diane Archer

Addressing high drug prices is a top national priority for the overwhelming majority of Americans, Republicans and Democrats alike. And both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders call for lifting the Congressional ban that keeps Medicare from negotiating drug prices as a way to rein in drug prices for older adults and people with disabilities. Controlling drug prices is particularly important given that per person drug spending in Medicare Part D is expected to rise 6.5 percent a year for the next 10 years.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services could save people with Medicare and taxpayers a substantial amount of money through drug price negotiation. But, the devil is in the details. A new report from the Kaiser Family Foundation suggests that some forms of drug price negotiation might not lead to lower drug prices, relying in part on a Congressional Budget Office projections.

The CBO projections turn on a narrow definition of negotiation. All you need do is see that every other advanced country reins in drug prices successfully for their citizens to know that negotiated drug prices in the United States can bring down drug prices. And, you don’t need a formulary for the government to do so successfully. If CMS simply negotiated for drug prices that the Veterans’ Administration secures or Medicaid or Canada, prices in the U.S. would fall sharply.

The pharmaceutical industry would likely threaten reducing their research. But, as it is, drug companies spend far more on marketing than on research. And, there are huge costs to allowing drug companies to set exorbitant prices for critical medications. Millions of Americans cannot afford the drugs they need.

Surprisingly, neither Clinton nor Sanders calls for negotiated drug prices for all Americans, which is the only way to ensure drugs are easily affordable and accessible for everyone. Sanders proposes letting people import from Canada, which would reduce prices for everyone. But, why make people go through that hassle? Clinton proposes some marketplace fixes to rein in prices. But, that’s wishful thinking given the monopoly power drug companies too often hold and the lack of price and effectiveness transparency in the drug marketplace, which does not allow for meaningful competition.

For a brief history of proposals to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices, read this report from the Kaiser Family Foundation.

For information from Just Care on ways to keep your drug costs down, click here.

• In 1940, the life expectancy of a 65-year-old was almost 14 additional years; today it is almost 21 years.
• By 2035, the number of older Americans will increase from 48 million today to 79 million.
• There are currently 2.8 workers for each Social Security beneficiary. By 2035, there will be 2.1 workers for each beneficiary.

Source: Social Security Administration
One Tip For Losing Weight
Written by Diane Archer

An older adult’s weight, as much as his or her blood pressure and cholesterol level, is important to health. Being overweight puts older adults at higher risk for type 2 diabetes and heart disease, among other chronic conditions, and reduces their ability to function. The National Institutes of Health has one tip for losing weight: Don’t focus on weight loss. Instead, set the right goals. Here’s how to do it:

• **Focus on a health diet and exercise.** Don’t focus on weight loss.
• **Be specific about the behavior change you want to accomplish.** “Walk more” is not concrete. “Walk a mile three times a day” is concrete, but can you really do it?
• **Set realistic goals.** Don’t be overly ambitious.
• **Change your goals over time,** depending upon how you’re doing.
• **Reward yourself as you make progress.** Even small progress should be rewarded.
• **Track your behavior.** Consider keeping a log of either what you are doing every day, such as food you’re eating, or distance you’re walking, or outcomes, such as how much weight you’ve lost.
• **Make it easier to eat less.** You are not likely to feel full until 15 minutes after you’ve eaten. But, eating slowly helps you feel fuller faster, as does eating a lot of fruits and vegetables

No matter what your weight, a loss of just five percent of your starting weight can have significant health benefits. If you have Medicare, keep in mind that Medicare covers weight-loss counseling. There is no evidence in the literature that dietary supplements or medications for weight loss work.

**How Do I Apply For Social Security Retirement Benefits?**

You should apply for retirement benefits three months before you want your payments to start. The easiest and most convenient way to apply for retirement benefits is by using our online application.

We may need to see certain documents in order to pay benefits. If you apply online, a list of documents we need to see will appear at the end of the application, along with instructions on where to submit them. The documents we may ask for are:

• your original birth certificate or other proof of birth [more info] (You may also submit a copy of your birth certificate certified by the issuing agency);
• proof of U.S. citizenship or lawful alien status if you were not born in the United States [more info];
• a copy of your U.S. military service paper(s) (e.g., DD-214 - Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty) if you had military service before 1968; [more info]; and
• a copy of your W-2 form(s) [more info] and/or self-employment tax return [more info] for last year.

For more information, go to Applying Online for Retirement Benefits.

You can also apply:

• By phone - Call us at 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778), Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. or
• In person - Visit your local Social Security Office. (Call first to make an appointment.)

Source: Social Security Administration Website