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1,198 COUNTY RETIREES COLLECT \$100,000

BYLINE: Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

BODY:

Nearly 1,200 retired Los Angeles County government employees receive pensions of more than \$100,000 a year, with the top 10 ranging from \$210,434 to \$316,047, county figures show.

The county has nearly as many six-figure pensioners as the state employees' and teachers' retirement systems combined, and experts believe the \$316,047 pension is the most received by any public employee in the nation.

The county has 1,198 retirees or their survivors with \$100,000-plus pensions, while the California Public Employees Retirement System has 816 and the California State Teachers' Retirement System has 427 - making a total of 1,243 for the two statewide systems - according to information the Daily News obtained under the state Public Records Act.

The findings surprised some taxpayer advocates who say it serves as more evidence of the enormous impact government pensions, salaries and benefits are having on local and state budgets and the huge costs to taxpayers.

"The taxpayers are being robbed blind by these pensions," said state Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Thousand Oaks.

Even county Treasurer and Tax Collector Mark Saladino, a member of the county retirement and pension boards, said he was surprised by the high number of former employees with six-figure pensions.

"It's surprising in the sense that there are not that many people who made more than \$100,000 a year in the past who have already retired," Saladino said.

Sheriff's Sgt. Patrick Gomez, president of the Los Angeles County Professional Peace Officers Association, which represents 6,700 employees of the sheriff, district attorney and coroner's office, said the union works to get better pensions for its members.

"But to see fellow county employees making \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year in retirement is ridiculous," Gomez said. "I don't know what formula they are using to calculate those pensions, but it would be nice if they would use it at our level."

Gomez said the largest pension of more than \$316,000 is "amazing."

The Los Angeles County Employees Retirement Association produced the data after the newspaper requested it under the state Public Records Act, but the association refused to provide the names of the retirees, including the person who gets the top payment.

The newspaper obtained similar information from the state teachers' and state employees' retirement systems under the Public Records Act.

County Chief Administrative Officer David Janssen said the county employs many high-paid doctors, lawyers and administrators, which he said is the reason it has so many with six-figure retirement incomes.

"The real challenge we have now is the cost of retiree health," Janssen said. "The county in the early 1990s agreed to pick up the full cost of health care for retirees. And the increases have been double-digit over the last several years."

Los Angeles County expects to contribute \$1.3 billion to its pension system this year, up from \$1 billion in 2002-03.

The state's taxpayers also foot an increasing bill for the California Public Employees Retirement System.

"Four years ago, taxpayers paid \$160 million to keep the (state) pension system afloat. This coming year, it will top \$2.6 billion, and that's just for CalPERS," McClintock said.

"What this means is the average family, who probably doesn't have a pension of their own, will pay \$300 in taxes next year just to support the state's public pension system."

In recent years, as the stock market sustained deep losses and tax revenues dried up, government agencies throughout the state were forced to contribute larger amounts of taxpayer money to keep their pension systems afloat.

"These spiraling costs are crushing local governments and now threatening the fiscal integrity of the state government," McClintock said. "The state is having to borrow \$1 billion this year to finance its pension obligations. San Diego is about to go belly-up for the same reason. It doesn't sound like Los Angeles County is too far behind.

"The end result is spiraling taxes and ultimately bankruptcy. So my advice to voters is to find out how your elected representatives have been voting and then act on that information."

Critics say the escalating cost of government salaries, pensions and benefits has sparked a rush by local governments to seek "targeted taxes" for parks, law enforcement and other services.

"These pensions take away from ongoing county operational expenses," said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association. "How can the taxpayers pay for fire, sheriff, the jails and other county services when they are paying for these pensions?"

Coupal noted that a portion of the \$15 billion bond measure that state voters approved in March will go to shore up government pension systems.

"We are encumbering our children and grandchildren to an extent that we should be ashamed of," Coupal said.

Mark Tarnowsky, spokesman for Service Employees International Union Local 660, which represents 50,000 county employees, said the union wants the public to know that the vast majority of county retirees do not earn six-figure incomes, particularly those who didn't work for the fire or sheriff's departments.

"The average non-safety retiree earns \$2,100 a month and is 72 years old," Tarnowsky said. "They are earning less than half of the average salary of \$4,300. And someone who is in Plan E - where most of our members are - who has worked for the county for 20 years, at age 60 gets 24 percent of their salary.

"We also have to remember that county workers do not get Social Security. This is their only income after retirement. So we are talking about people getting less than \$20,000 a year. That's just barely enough to live on in the county, to pay the rent, for food and medical expenses."

Steven B. Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, who for decades has studied government salaries and pensions, said the size of county pensions is "ridiculous."

"These people are millionaires. Ask any insurance agent or stockbroker how much money they would have to pay for a lifetime annuity to generate that amount of cash and they will tell you it's in the millions."

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EDITOR-NOTE:

Sidebar: 'Enhancements' can add considerably to pensions

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