

PSERS Eligibility for Public Safety Telecommunicators

Overview

Should Public Safety Telecommunicators (PSTs) be moved from the Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS) Plans 2/3 to the Public Safety Employees' Retirement System (PSERS)?

Background

In July 2022, Senator Van De Wege wrote to the Committee asking the Committee to consider moving PSTs to PSERS.

PSTs work for Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs). There are both primary and secondary PSAPs. While there are important differences between the two, for the purpose of this proposal they can be considered identical. PSAPs have been established at several levels, including state, federal, tribal, municipal, interagency agreement, and nonprofit. Many, but not all PSAPs, are currently participating in PERS.

A [2020 report to the Legislature](#) noted the following findings that are relevant to this study:

- ❖ Physical risk for PSTs is low.
 - For contrast with other public safety employees, PSTs are not handcuffing suspects or climbing high ladders.
- ❖ Mental risks are high. This can include things like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and subsequent burnout.
 - PSTs are often on the phone talking people through tragedies and traumas. According to this report (and similar reports from other jurisdictions), these calls can be particularly stressful when they involve children.
- ❖ The average career length for PSTs in Washington is nine and one-half years, and five years nationally.

Highlights

- ❖ PSERS was created with an emphasis on physical risk, but it has expanded over time.
- ❖ Both members and employers are expected to pay more for benefits in PSERS.
- ❖ The proposal would likely benefit long-term employees through earlier retirement. However, early retirement in PSERS requires at least ten years of service credit earned exclusively while in PSERS. Thus, members will need to

earn at least ten more years of service after transferring to take advantage of the earlier retirement.

- ❖ Shorter-term employees would pay more for benefits they may not receive. However, by paying more they could end up with larger roll over balances if they terminate and move to a job with a non-Department of Retirement Systems employer.
- ❖ There are options for addressing workplace risk both inside and outside of pension policy, and policymakers may differ on their preferred approach.
 - Expanding PSERS may mitigate the impacts of some job risks. However, it is unlikely to mitigate the sources of reported burnout for shorter term employees.
- ❖ Expanding PSERS has implications for contractual rights, and employee retention. Please see the [briefing paper](#) for more information.

Committee Activity

The Committee received an initial briefing on the topic at the September meeting, followed by a policy briefing in October, and a public hearing was held in November where the Committee took a vote and passed a bill draft.

Recommendation to the 2023 Legislature

Sponsor a bill draft to provide an optional transfer window for existing PSTs who are in PERS to transfer to PSERS, and require that newly hired PSTs will be in PSERS.

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