

Opinion: Time to discuss state employee benefits

By Joe Nation

Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research has issued two recent reports on the condition of public employee pension funds in California. The first identified a \$425 billion funding shortfall for three state pension systems: the California Public Employees' Retirement System, California State Teachers' Retirement System, and the University of California Retirement System. The second report found a nearly \$200 billion shortfall for local government pension systems.

Both reports focused on the overall financial health of pension systems in California but did not touch on retiree benefit levels. It's time to begin that conversation.

Discussing public employee retirement benefits is dangerous politically. So let's start with the legal status of benefits owed to public employees.

Benefits to public employee retirees are legally protected. Period. Case and contract law guarantee retirement pay, even in the obscene cases where public employees double dip (i.e., collect a large pension from one or more employers and work at full salary for another). If the public is angry about benefits levels or double dippers, we shouldn't blame public employees, but the political leaders who approved benefits that are both excessive and unsustainable.

I may have a unique perspective on this issue because every member of my immediate family has worked in public service. (My mother is a retired school librarian; my younger brother works as a firefighter/paramedic; an older brother was a high school science teacher; and my father retired from a public university.) They and all public employees are owed what we

have promised them.

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