



Retirement News Highlights

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Upgraded retirement plan approved for county paramedics

By Luke Parker

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CENTREVILLE — Starting in July, eligible emergency services personnel may be authorized to participate in an enhanced retirement program generally provided to police, making the Queen Anne’s County Department of Emergency Services (DES) a more attractive employer for current and prospective staff members.

“This is probably one of the biggest shots in the arm for us to be able to retain staff,” DES Director Scott Haas said. “It’s been the one missing link that we’ve [needed] to be competitive with the western shore.”

During their May 10 meeting, the QA Commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution 22-07, which will allow DES assistant chiefs, captains, lieutenants, sergeants, paramedics I and II, and emergency medical technicians II to transition from the Employee’s Pension System to the Law Enforcement Officers Pension System (LEOPS) — a retirement plan available to state employees who are certified as either a police officer, paramedic, or firefighter.

Despite the commissioners’ approval, the program will not officially begin until the county’s fiscal year 2023 budget is approved.

Under LEOPS, qualified staff members may retire at age 50 or after 25 years of eligible service, according to the Maryland State Retirement and Pension System. Under the current system, DES employees are allowed to retire once their age and years of duty total 90 — an overwhelming requirement for the department’s younger employees, said DES Assistant Chief Scott Wheatley.

“There is only so much the mind and body can take,” Wheatley said in an interview. “LEOPS allows our qualified emergency services clinicians a much better retirement.”

In addition to earlier retirement possibilities, LEOPS also incorporates a voluntary Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP). Staff who select to participate in the program can “retire” and begin accumulating retirement benefits while still working for the county. Benefits are deposited in a DROP account within the state’s retirement and pension system, where they will be compounded annually with 4% tax deferred interest as long as they remain in the program.

Once an employee stops participating in DROP, they must terminate their employment with DES. In addition to their monthly retirement benefits, the accumulated DROP balance will then be delivered as a one-time payment.

After one year as a retiree, former employees will also have the option to adjust their retirement allowance annually to “keep pace with inflation.”

DES officials have spoken of the challenges their department has faced due to losing benefits compared to other agencies across Maryland. Resignations and vacancies have ebbed and flowed at the department for months. Haas said the department currently has four openings: one in dispatch and three in EMS.

Haas and Wheatley both said the county's transition to LEOPS will elevate their department's status as a regional employer, to both new and current staff. According to county HR Director Beverly Churchill, LEOPS has "received almost 100% approval" from a DES employee petition on the subject.

"This is going to be a huge benefit for our members," Wheatley said. "And it's going to be a huge benefit for retainment and recruitment as well."

Churchill said the estimated costs to the county for participation in LEOPS will be between \$570,000 and \$600,000 annually.

The commissioners' proposed FY 2023 budget includes \$610,000 for the expense.

"LEOPS was necessary to maintain the stability of essential workers during a period of economic stress," said Commissioner Steve Wilson. Adding how proud he was of the DES — calling it one of the best emergency systems in the state — Wilson said it was "critical" the county didn't lose any of its "key personnel."

For more information about LEOPS, contact the county's HR Department at 410-758-4406.

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