

## NO HIKE FOR SOCIAL SECURITY NEXT YEAR

**WASHINGTON:** There will be no benefit increase next year for millions of Social Security recipients, disabled veterans and federal retirees, the government said yesterday. It's just the third time in 40 years that payments will remain flat. All three times have come since 2010. And there's more bad news. The lack of a benefit increase means that many older people could face higher Medicare costs, an issue that has advocates lobbying Congress.

The main reason for no increase next year is low gas prices. By law, the annual cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA, is based on a government measure of inflation. That gauge came out yesterday. As of Wednesday, AAA said the average price of a gallon of regular gasoline was \$2.30, about 90 cents less than it was a year ago.

### 'Plunging gas prices'

"The big story has been the plunging gas prices," said Dean Baker, co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. "There's not a lot of inflation anywhere." The announcement will affect benefits for more than 70 million people, more than one-fifth of the nation's population. Almost 60 million retirees, disabled workers, spouses and children get Social Security benefits. The average monthly Social Security payment is \$1,224.

The COLA also affects benefits for about 4 million disabled veterans, 2.5 million federal retirees and their survivors, and more than 8 million people who get Supplemental Security Income, the disability program for the poor. Many people who get SSI also receive Social Security. Congress enacted automatic increases for Social Security beneficiaries in 1975, when inflation was high and there was a lot of pressure to regularly raise benefits. Since then, increases have averaged 4 percent a year.

But in the past decade, the COLA has been that big only once. Advocates for seniors said years of small increases or no increase are eroding the buying power of benefits, regardless of the official inflation numbers. "You've got all kinds of people receiving COLA-adjusted retirement benefits. This is going to be another blow to their retirement income," said Mary Johnson of The Senior Citizens League. "It's a huge amount over a lifetime."

Most Social Security recipients have their Medicare Part B premiums for outpatient care deducted directly from their Social Security payments, and the annual cost-of-living increase is usually enough to cover any rise in premiums. When that doesn't happen, a long-standing federal "hold harmless" law protects the majority of beneficiaries from having their Social Security payments reduced. But that leaves about 30 percent of Medicare beneficiaries on the hook for a premium increase that otherwise would be spread among all. Those who would pay the higher premiums include 2.8 million new beneficiaries, 1.6 million whose premiums aren't deducted from their Social Security payments, and 3.1 million people with higher incomes. Their premiums could jump by about \$54 a month; it could be more for those with higher incomes. States also would feel a budget impact because they pay part of the Medicare premium for about 10 million low-income beneficiaries.

### Protect all retirees

Both AARP and the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association are urging Congress to protect all retirees from dramatic increases in Medicare costs. "Ideally, all Medicare beneficiaries should be held harmless in the face of no Social Security COLA adjustment," Nancy LeaMond, AARP's executive vice president said in a letter to lawmakers.

Social Security is financed by a 12.4 percent tax on wages up to \$118,500, with half paid by workers and the other half paid by employers. The amount of wages subject to Social Security taxes usually goes up each year. But because there is no COLA, it will remain at \$118,500 next year. The cost-of-living adjustment is based on the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers, or CPI-W, a broad measure of consumer prices generated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. — AP



**PENNSYLVANIA:** Carol Mead poses for a portrait at her home, in Montrose, Pa. Mead, 67, is retired and her husband, 70, must work at a local rock quarry to close the gap from her Social Security. — AP



**BALTIMORE:** Police stand near vans holding protesters early yesterday. — AP

## OFFICERS DISBAND SIT-IN AT BALTIMORE CITY HALL

PROTEST OVER NUMEROUS DEMANDS FOR BETTER POLICING

**BALTIMORE:** Baltimore police disbanded an overnight occupation of City Hall by activists opposed to making the interim police commissioner's appointment permanent, and at least 12 people could be seen being led away early yesterday to police vehicles.

At least 25 police officers converged at the building's front entrance hours before dawn as activists were still inside participating in a sit-in over numerous demands for better policing. Several demonstrators could be seen by an Associated Press reporter as they were led off in plastic handcuffs and loaded into transport vehicles at around 4 am. "It is our duty to fight for our freedom! We have nothing to lose but our chains!" others watching the police operation shouted at the officers.

### 'Failure to comply'

Police said in a statement posted on their social media site that a small number of protesters had decided to leave after hours of warnings to the demonstrators. "The remaining protesters refused to leave the building. As a direct result of their failure to comply, the remaining protesters have been arrested and charged with trespassing. There are no reported injuries at this time to any protesters or officers," the police statement added.

Police did not elaborate on the number of people arrested or their identities. A message left for Baltimore Police Department spokesman TJ Smith wasn't immediately returned. Following the police operation, police were seen leaving and the complex was largely quiet by 5 am. Many of the protesters were student activists, including at least two juveniles who were taken into custody.

The protesters said they opposed city

deliberations to make permanent the interim appointment of Police Commissioner Kevin Davis, adding they had been given no chance for input. The group also wanted a sit-down meeting with Davis and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, and refused to leave City Hall until city officials agreed to meet a list of demands that included better treatment for protesters, a significant investment in public schools and social services and a promise that police would avoid using armored vehicles and riot gear. The protesters also asked that officers always wear badges and name tags.

After more than a dozen protesters were arrested, others left voluntarily but voiced their disappointment with the police response. "All we are doing is peacefully demonstrating. We were disrespected by Kevin Davis. He didn't take us seriously," said Kevin Wellons, 19, who left the sit-in around 3:30 am with several others.

Kwame Rose, an organizer who had been with the group for hours, also left with several others before police moved in. Rose said activists will continue to press for police reforms. "The politicians, they failed us today," Rose said. "All (Davis) had to do was come upstairs for ten minutes. All we wanted was for the commissioner to meet the people he's attacking. And now he's attacking us again."

Davis took the interim role in July after predecessor Anthony Batts was fired amid a spike in violent crime in Baltimore. The spike followed unrest and rioting in April after the death of Freddie Gray, a black man who died after suffering a severe injury in police custody. A City Council committee voted to make Davis the permanent police commissioner.

### 'No justice, no peace'

Members of the Baltimore Uprising coalition, which includes both high school and community activists, had begun shouting from the upper gallery of City Council chambers as a Council committee prepared for its vote Wednesday. "All night, all day, we will fight for Freddie Gray!" the activists chanted amid calls to postpone the vote. "No justice, no peace!" The activists then began their sit-in.

Davis' appointment still must be approved by the full council. A vote is expected Monday. Prior to the committee meeting, The Baltimore Sun surveyed Council members and found nine of 15 were prepared to vote for Davis at the full council meeting. If approved, Davis would earn \$200,000 a year under a contract to run through June of 2020.

Three of the committee's five members voted in favor of Davis. Councilman Nick Mosby, who is married to State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby, voted against the confirmation, while Carl Stokes, who is running for mayor, abstained. Marilyn Mosby had decided to prosecute six officers in connection with Gray's death. All of the officers are currently awaiting trial. After Mosby's decision and the widespread unrest, homicides began to rise and residents in crime-addled neighborhoods accused police officers of abandoning their posts.

Addressing the council committee Wednesday, Davis said that he remains committed to training officers to actively engage and interact with community members. Davis also emphasized his commitment to "respect and fight for the right for Americans to assemble and peacefully protest." — AP