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## Legislation Leaves Retirees On One Side, Unions on Other

By Joe Davidson  
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Before James J. Cameron Jr. retired after 34 years with the federal government, he served as a law enforcement officer with Customs, the Border Patrol and the Drug Enforcement Administration. Now he'd like to serve his country again. But he doesn't want to lose money doing it.

Like other retired federal employees, Cameron, 67, faces a quandary when thinking about hitching up for another ride with Uncle Sam. If they go back to government work, their salaries would be cut by the amount of their pension.

"I would not consider taking part-time work if I had to have a reduced annuity," said Cameron, who now lives in New Portland, Maine, after postings in eight cities around the country.

If he found work outside the federal sector, with a local police department for example, his federal annuity would not shrink.

The Senate may vote this week on legislation that includes a provision allowing Uncle Sam to rehire retirees like Cameron without making them lose some of their retirement income.

"This will strengthen the federal government's ability to serve the public, particularly at a time when agencies face a wave of retirement of highly experienced employees and there exists a critical need for these skilled employees," Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) said in a statement yesterday.

Currently, agencies can rehire retirees with no penalty if the Office of Personnel Management grants a waiver. That bureaucratic hassle "creates a disincentive for experienced federal retirees to return to federal service -- preventing their knowledge and experience from filling critical agency needs," Collins said. "The cumbersome waiver process also dissuades agencies from considering annuitants when evaluating their overall workforce strategy."

But hold on.

This plan to ease retired folks back into the federal workforce isn't universally embraced. While federal employee unions generally support efforts to improve the lot of retirees and to strengthen the federal workforce, some union leaders are not happy with the Collins bill.

"Managers would have complete discretion to hire annuitants of their choice, without any regard to veteran's preference, or any objective, competitive criteria," Beth Moten, the American Federation of Government Employees legislative and political director, said in a letter to Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.), chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. "This lack of hiring

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standards violates all merit system hiring principles."

Moten added that retiree applicants would have "an enormous competitive advantage over regular federal workers" because the hiring agencies would not have to pay for annuitants non-salary benefits, such as retirement costs.

"This cost-savings is likely to provide a strong incentive for federal agencies to bypass, for example, a veteran who is a qualified experienced federal worker in favor of a reemployed annuitant," Moten said.

Left unspoken is the point that rehired folks would not be union workers, said Bill Bransford, general counsel of the Senior Executives Association. The association represents high-level federal civil servants and supports the legislation, as do other members of the Government Managers Coalition.

"We think it's a very important tool for agencies to use when they are facing a brain drain," Bransford said. That's a better choice than using outside contractors, he added.

Collins addressed Moten's concern that agencies would bypass qualified applicants in favor of rehiring retirees by limiting the amount of time they could again work for Uncle Sam. Her proposal would restrict that time to no more than 65 days during the first six months of employment, 130 days during the first year and 390 days during the retiree's lifetime.

That means re-employed retirees would not take jobs away from active federal employees, said Dan Adcock, legislative director of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, which supports the bill.

"The fact of the matter is that 60 percent of the federal workforce is eligible to retire within the next five years. That means some agencies are not going to have workers with skill sets critical to their missions," Adcock said.

The division between union leaders and retirees leaves people like Lieberman, who has supporters in both groups, somewhere in the middle. He praised the legislation for "giving agencies an additional tool for bringing retired workers back," but went on to worry aloud that "agencies may be tempted to overuse this option, bringing back annuitants who may not be best for the job and blocking opportunities for advancement for younger personnel."

And Sen. Daniel K. Akaka (D-Hawaii), chairman of the Senate subcommittee that oversees the federal workforce, abstained during a full committee vote on the measure, but he has indicated he will support it when it comes to a final vote.

Meanwhile, Cameron spends his days swinging golf clubs, hunting game and playing with his grandkids. But he misses the job. "I almost wish I had not retired when I did," he said.

Being a patriot, he said he would consider returning to work even with a financial hit if Uncle Sam made a strong enough case. But "they'd have to have something awfully important they wanted done," Cameron said. "I don't want to give up the finances."

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