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1. Congressional Update for 2024. When Congress comes back into session this month, they have a long list of priorities that must be dealt with, including preventing a government shutdown. Here are several bills that FEA-R is monitoring, that continue to need your advocacy to get them across the finish line. When you contact your Representative, ask him/her to take positive action on these bills (find your representative at www.house.gov):

- The Social Security Fairness Act (HR 82/S597). FEA-R just received a report from Karen Rose, our legislative committee representative to NEA-R. She reported that NEA is optimistic about the passage of this bill that would eliminate GPO/WEP, which reduces one's social security or spousal's pension if an employee has ever worked under a public employee pension program that did not pay into Social Security (even if the employee had previously earned all one's SS credits). The bill now has over 300 co-sponsors in the House.
- Equal COLA Act (HR 866/S.3194) This bill rectifies the disparities in the cost-of-living adjustments among federal retirees. Currently FERS retirees have their COLA reduced by 1% every time the COLA adjustment of CSRS and Social Security recipients receive an adjustment of 3% or higher. This has a significant impact on a retiree's ability to keep up with inflation during their retirement years.
- Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP) Premiums. For over 250,000 federal employees who signed up for this program, they have watched the increases in their premiums go up at astronomical amounts. These hikes have far exceeded initial quotes and raise concerns about the programs' promised stability. Congress needs to conduct hearings to examine the reasons behind these huge increases and recognize the need for Congressional oversight of this program.
- Honoring Civil Servants Killed in the Line of Duty Act (HR 5883/S.3029). This bill would significantly increase death gratuities and funeral allowances for federal employees who tragically lose their lives while serving their country. The bill would provide a gratuity payment of \$100,000 to beneficiaries of federal employees who die in the line of duty without any reduction due to other benefits. It would also be adjusted annually due to changes in the cost of living.

2. NEA-Retired Spring Conference. The NEA-R Spring Conference will be March 3-5, 2024, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. NEA-R will offer several workshops for NEA-R members on such topics as political action, stopping anti-education initiatives in our public schools, saving money in retirement and so much more. Registration will open later this month. Visit www.nea.org/retired for more information.

3. NEA President Becky Pringle Offers Support to those in the Middle East (from the NEA website). The impact of the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas has caused loss of human life in both Israel and Gaza and has left education communities and the whole world in shock. NEA extends its unwavering support to all student and educators in the region, and the NEA is committed to advocate for a peaceful resolution, the protection of schools, universities, and educational personnel and the prioritization of education in relief efforts. NEA is working with Education International (EI) and EI affiliates in the West Bank to help provide support to meet the most urgent needs of educators and students in Gaza. This includes the distribution of food and blankets as well of books and toys for children. To find out how to participate, visit: www.nea.org/international

4. The Cost of Postage Going Up. The United States Post Office announced that postage rates will go from 66 cents to 68 cents for the first ounce, on January 21, 2024. The additional ounce will remain 24 cents. If you have existing “Forever Stamps,” you can continue to use them and are protected against the price increase. However, if you buy “Forever Stamps” on or after January 21, 2024, you will pay 68 cents per stamp.
