

For Release:  
Tuesday, September 22, 2009

**\*\*News Advisory – Press Conference – Photo Opportunity\*\***

**SONOMA COUNTY RETIREES FILE FEDERAL LAWSUIT AGAINST COUNTY FOR  
DRASTICALLY CUTTING THEIR HEALTH BENEFITS  
Press Conference held by Retirees on September 22 Following the Filing**

**Date:** Tuesday, September 22, 2009  
**Time:** 1:00 p.m.  
**Location:** Sonoma County Veteran's Building, 1351 Maple Avenue, Santa Rosa, CA  
Lodge Room

**Who:** Sonoma County Association of Retired Employees ("SCARE") Members  
SCARE Board  
Attorney for SCARE

**Media Contacts:** Andrew Lah, Lewis, Feinberg, Lee, Renaker & Jackson: 510-839-6824  
Carol Bauer, SCARE: 707-874-9149

**What:** Retirees will speak regarding the promises made, and broken, by Sonoma County and the impact of the County's actions on their health and financial security. Lawyer for the Retirees will be present to distribute copies of the filed complaint and answer questions.

**Further Information:**

On September 22, 2009, the Sonoma County Association of Retired Employees ("SCARE") filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco charging Sonoma County with violating state and federal law by implementing drastic cuts to its retiree health care benefit system. For decades, Sonoma County induced employees to work and continue to work for the County by promising them that it would pay all or substantially all of the cost of the employees' health care benefits after they retired. Despite these promises, the County implemented drastic cuts to this system in June 2009, which will require SCARE's members to pay hundreds more dollars a month toward their medical premiums.

Richard Gearhart, who was the County's Human Resources Director from 1986 to 2001 said, "I am very disappointed that the County of Sonoma would renege on years of promises to County retirees to pay a substantial majority of the cost of providing retiree medical benefits. Employees and retirees relied on these promises when planning their retirements from many years of dedicated service to the County and the public. Now retirees are finding health care increasingly unaffordable with no option to return to their old jobs." As Human Resources Director, Mr. Gearhart was in charge of negotiating the benefit programs on behalf of the County.

The lawsuit, *SCARE v. Sonoma County*, was filed on behalf of SCARE's 1500 members who are retired employees of Sonoma County and their spouses. Most of SCARE's members are elderly individuals who live on fixed incomes. Approximately 30% of the Sonoma County retirees receive County pensions of \$1,000 or less per month, and 60% receive pensions of \$2,000 or less per month. With the County's cuts to the retiree health benefit system, many County retirees will have to spend large portions of their monthly incomes on medical premiums, and others will have to choose between medical care and other necessities.

Carol Bauer, President of SCARE, states that “many of SCARE’s members will be greatly harmed by the County’s actions. Retirees dedicated their careers, in many cases 25 years or more, to the County on the promise of these benefits. Now, when retirees have limited means and are in great need of these benefits, the County is backing out on its end of the deal. It is unconscionable.” Quotes from retirees who will be greatly impacted by these cuts are included in an Addendum to this Release.

SCARE worked tirelessly over the last year to try to resolve this issue before filing suit. However, the Board of Supervisors was unwilling to even discuss reasonable solutions that honored the promises that the County made to its employees.

Jeffrey Lewis, one of the attorneys for the retirees, a shareholder in Oakland-based Lewis, Feinberg, Lee, Renaker & Jackson, observed that “this case underscores the importance of the well-established body of law in California that requires public entities to uphold their promises to employees regarding retiree benefits.”

For further information, and for copies of the complaint, please see [www.lewisfeinberg.com](http://www.lewisfeinberg.com).

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## **ADDENDUM: THE IMPACT OF SONOMA COUNTY'S ACTIONS ON RETIREES**

Five years from now, under the County's health care benefits plan I "would have to consider seeking employment to be able to afford insurance." Ten years from now "I would have to consider selling my home and/or any other asset to hang on to medical coverage."

- 59 year-old Sonoma County Retiree

The County's cuts mean "that I have to go back to work. I have no option. I need good and affordable insurance. I based my whole retirement plan on having the insurance I have always had as promised by the County. I feel ripped off by the County I gave 22 years to. We took pay cuts, no raises, leaves without pay, etc. to help the County which now wants to abandon us."

- 55 year-old Sonoma County Retiree

Five years from now, under the County's health care benefits plan, I will be "unable to meet financial obligations or essentials such as food or prescription co-pays." The County's plan will "cause dire crisis [and is] not what I signed up for at the beginning of employment."

- 70 year-old Sonoma County Retiree

Ten years from now, the County's health care benefits plan, "would severely deplete my monthly income; roughly 74% would go toward healthcare and there would be very little left to make mortgage payments, buy food, utilities, or any other necessities for that matter. I believe that my retirement/insurance benefits were a part of the agreement the County made with me as an employee. They were part of what was offered to me when I was hired. The County should stand behind their agreements and not take back their promises at a later date whatever the reason might be."

- 60 year-old Sonoma County Retiree

I worked for the County for 40 years and my husband worked for the County for 20 years. "Together we gave them 60 years of our lives, and what do we get in return? Sixty years of false promises that we wove our lives around. We based our futures on those promises. How do we change now at this late date in our lives?"

- 62 year-old Sonoma County Retiree

Ten years from now, under the County's health care benefits plan, my medical care costs will be "\$400 more than my net retirement."

- 64 year-old Sonoma County Retiree