

METRO & STATE

Insurance irks police, fire retirees

By Randy Ludlow
The Columbus Dispatch

The move to extend the solvency of the health-care fund for retired Ohio police officers and firefighters has left some retirees feeling queasy.

The board of the Ohio Police and Fire Pension Fund acted earlier this year to shift from a self-insured group policy to providing a monthly stipend to allow retirees to

buy their own health insurance beginning in 2019.

The change is projected to reduce the fund's costs by \$25 million, to \$108 million next year, with projected savings increasing the life span of the near-\$900 million fund from nine years to 15 years.

But the coming change has not been without problems for some former first-responders, led by complaints about the performance of London-based

Aon, the company hired to help retirees find and buy insurance policies.

Some retirees also have complained about a lack of insurance providers in some counties, while some believe that the fixed stipend for retirees younger than 65 and not yet covered by Medicare is inadequate.

"Non-Medicare people, in particular, are running into every imaginable problem

from cost to coverage to logistics," said Michael Taylor, president of the Ohio Association of Professional Fire Fighters.

"Aon has failed miserably" in helping pension-fund retirees find appropriate private insurance and Medicare supplemental policies, Taylor said, adding that pension officials are "doing what they can"

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**A LINEUP OF
HANUKKAH
FESTIVITIES
THIS WEEK**

COMMENTARY

Tangled system can be deadly



Theodore Decker

On a summer day in 1994, a police officer ticketed a Far East Side man named Martin L. Wright for walking in the road.

Three other charges — furnishing false information to avoid a citation, resisting arrest and littering — suggest that Wright was not happy about the ticket.

Wright had pleaded guilty to felony drug trafficking a year earlier and had been the subject of at least one bench warrant for failing to abide by a judge's pretrial orders.

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With care and concern



Site coordinator Brittany Price, left, walks to her office with senior Nikyla Fitzgerald at Hamilton Township High School. Price has spent the past year at Hamilton as part of the Communities in Schools of Central Ohio program, which helps students overcome obstacles to academic achievement.

[ADAM CAIRNS/DISPATCH PHOTOS]

Rapidly expanding nonprofit offers support, resources for students in need

By Alissa Widman Neese
The Columbus Dispatch

She coordinates students' college visits, helps them resolve conflicts and stocks a snack pantry in her office to keep them from going hungry.

But one of Brittany Price's most meaningful gestures, according to 17-year-old Nikyla Fitzgerald, was making sure the teen's family had a turkey to eat for Thanksgiving dinner. The holidays are a difficult time for her family, especially after Fitzgerald's oldest brother died six years ago, she said.

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Teen girls rearrange cards as an exercise in prioritizing life events as part of a mentoring program with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Columbus at Hamilton Township High School.

Fees hiked to fund roadwork

By Dean Narciso
The Columbus Dispatch

DELAWARE — The state law that allows counties, cities and townships to enact vehicle-registration taxes in \$5 increments is increasingly being used, even by communities considered well-off.

Delaware County is the most recent to consider charging a \$5 fee on

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STUDENTS

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Price also referred them to an “adopt-a-family” program that will ensure they have presents to open Christmas morning for the first time in years.

“It was a huge weight off my mom’s shoulders,” said Fitzgerald, a senior at Hamilton Township High School near Obetz, where Price has worked for about a year.

Price is a site coordinator for Communities in Schools of Central Ohio, a nonprofit group that works in area schools to help students meet academic goals by overcoming challenges outside the classroom.

For much of the group’s 25-year history, such support wasn’t available outside of Columbus City Schools. But over the past three years, the group has grown significantly, expanding into the Hamilton, Whitehall and South-Western school districts and two Graham charter schools in Columbus.

Today, Communities in Schools of Central Ohio provides services in 24 schools in five districts with 14,500 total students, 1,500 of whom receive individualized and targeted support based on referrals.

“There’s a stigma that areas labeled as ‘suburban’ don’t have the same needs, so they often don’t get the same support,” Price said. “But without that support, the



Brittany Price, of the Communities in Schools of Central Ohio program, holds the door while others bring in donated food to Hamilton Township High School.

[ADAM CAIRNS/DISPATCH PHOTOS]

‘inner-city’ problems affecting students in suburban schools can get out of hand quickly.”

Communities in Schools of Central Ohio is the state’s only affiliate of the national group. Communities in Schools has 130 affiliates across the country, serving 2,300 schools of all grade levels nationwide with full-time site coordinators.

The growth reflects increasing student needs and a commitment by school officials who are more aware of, and willing to address, the challenges that students face, said Amy Gordon, the local group’s executive director.

The traditional school districts the nonprofit serves all have more economically disadvantaged students than Ohio’s average of 49 percent, according to Ohio Department of Education data. That

figure has increased 8 percent since 2010, the first year student poverty was measured.

About 1 in 5 Ohio children, or 513,000, lived in poverty last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In Franklin County, it’s 1 in 4. When parsed by race, the statistics are even worse for minority children.

“It seems like every time we turn around, there’s another barrier we didn’t think of yet,” said Paul Smathers, principal at Whitehall-Yearling High School, which teamed up with Communities in Schools last year.

Ultimately, the goal of site coordinators such as Price is to improve attendance, behavior and academic performance. But doing so requires building relationships with students and shattering barriers that often have little to do with

school, she said.

Some days, she helps prospective first-generation college students fill out financial-aid forms.

Other days, she connects families with resources to help them overcome poverty, homelessness or medical problems. Or she provides support to students from broken families plagued by drug abuse or violence.

And almost every day, she’s lending an ear with care and concern.

“Everyone needs a person they can turn to, outside their family, to help them get through their problems,” Fitzgerald said. “Ms. Brittany and I immediately clicked. Now, if I need something, I come to her first before I come to anyone else.”

Communities in Schools also connects schools and families with more than 100



Jac'quese Hargrove, director of teen programs and services for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Columbus, meets with a group of girls as part of a mentoring program at Hamilton Township High School. They are discussing how to manage time and make priorities.

community partners, including businesses, faith groups, colleges and universities, and other nonprofit groups.

On Wednesday, for example, small groups of Hamilton girls met with a mentor from Boys and Girls Clubs of Columbus during lunch. They organized cards labeled with priorities, such as schoolwork, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs and time for family, friends and self-care, and discussed how to juggle the responsibilities.

The program, “SMART Girls,” also a hit at South-Western, aims to build confidence and decision-making skills.

Typically it costs \$70,000 to \$80,000 annually for Communities in Schools to place a site coordinator at a school, Gordon said. If a district pays for a portion of the cost — typically with Title I federal funds distributed to schools with low-income students, or other grants — the group matches the remaining cost.

Even so, cost can be

an obstacle for schools seeking help, Gordon said.

Officials in schools with a partnership say it’s worth it. After just one year, Whitehall and Hamilton students who receive specialized help already have experienced improvement in attendance and academic performance and declines in discipline problems, they said.

That supports the notion that with their basic needs met, students can focus better on learning, they said.

“If somebody’s asking for your math homework, but you’ve been worried about if you’re going to eat today, or getting your little sister to school on time, it comes down to a simple priority of life,” Smathers said. “Communities in Schools is helping us overcome those barriers so we can help our kids be successful.”

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its 200,000 registered vehicle owners, though officials say they take no joy in doing so.

At a recent Delaware County commissioners meeting, more than one official mentioned that this would be the first hike in the so-called permissive fee in 30 years.

The county devotes almost 0.4 percent of its sales tax to road widenings, train crossings and other upgrades required by dramatic residential growth. That’s about \$17

million annually.

But it’s not enough. “The amount of infrastructure we’re maintaining continues to grow,” said Rob Riley, the county’s chief deputy engineer. He noted that before the sales tax, in the 1990s, the county mostly had two-lane, rural roads to maintain and no streetlights or signals. Today, he said, there are new bridges, complex intersections, 30 traffic signals and almost 300 streetlights.

“We’re having to start to do things that we’ve never had to do,” Riley said.

At hearings scheduled for early next year,

questions could arise about the nature of transportation, and who should pay for policies of aggressive growth and development — government or motorists.

“That’s a conversation that I think some communities are having,” said Kent Scarrett, executive director of the Ohio Municipal League.

“It’s an interesting paradox. You want to provide for more residents and opportunities and to grow the area ... but you also want to make sure the growth is maintained in a responsible way,” Scarrett said. “It sort of challenges the well-off because other communities are

not experiencing that growth.”

The payoff, or pain, from the vehicle tax is greater in urban areas. The Columbus suburbs, along with the cities of Delaware and Powell, have reached the current \$20-a-year limit allowed by law. Beginning next year, however, an additional \$5 can be levied.

Brad Irons, long-time Marion County engineer, is reluctant to impose the tax. But his county’s traffic volume is about a tenth of Delaware County’s 200,000 vehicles.

“It helps, but it’s like trying to put a Band-Aid on when your arm’s

falling off,” he said. “To piss off your public for \$5, to pave 4 or 5 miles of road? Is that worth it?”

Scarrett said each community’s tolerance for growth and taxes is different.

“Some communities are more averse than others,” he said. Some perceive no benefit from growth. Others believe government should build cash reserves for extras like roundabouts, instead of going to the taxpayers. “Those are all local decisions.”

Union County also devotes a small (1/8th of 1 percent) portion of its sales tax to road maintenance. And it has yet to enact the license

tax, despite being Ohio’s fastest-growing county, said Jeff Stauch, county engineer.

But there are now discussions about tapping into a \$5 increase that would generate about \$400,000 annually, Stauch said — enough to pave about 3 miles of road per year.

As people continue to move into Delaware County for schools, parks and jobs, Riley thinks residents already have spoken.

“We’re blessed to have the resources we do have,” he said. “But that all comes at a price.”

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