

Podcast Name: TRS Afterschool Special

Episode 1: Membership Matters: Benefits That Go Beyond Retirement

Length: 17 minutes 46 seconds

Host: Rob Maxwell

Guest: Barbie Pearson, TRS Chief Benefit Officer

Description: From your first day on the job to retirement and beyond, TRS is with you every step of the way. TRS Chief Benefit Officer Barbie Pearson shares how TRS serves Texas public education employees as they build a secure future, explains the value of TRS membership, and discusses the role TRS plays throughout every stage of a member's career. You'll also get a behind-the-scenes look at the people, purpose, and mission dedicated to serving members and delivering benefits that make a positive difference in their lives.

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Welcome to the Afterschool Special, a podcast from the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. These are

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real conversations with the people we work with and work for about how we support more than 2

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million active and retired members across the Lone Star State. We're talking retirement benefits,

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investments, and the topics teachers are thinking about right now. So, put your pencils down, skip

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the pop quiz, and take a listen. Hi everybody, I'm Rob Maxwell. I'm your host of our podcast here at

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TRS, the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. For our first guest, we brought in our Chief Benefit

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Officer, Mrs. Barbie Pearson. Barbie, hi. Hi, Rob. So glad you could make it in. Thanks for

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having me. You have been at TRS for 40 years as of September. Yes, sir. Serving our teachers and

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our educators across this great state. Tell us,

let's begin, just to jump right in. One sentence

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from you why TRS matters to you personally.
Well, personally, I have some nieces that

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are teachers and nephews that are teachers and I
also had an aunt that drove a school bus for many,

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many years, but just growing up in a small
town, you know, everybody and I had, you know,

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teachers that made an impact on me. I had
cafeteria workers, custodians. I actually just

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saw Granny Betty who was a cafeteria worker this
past weekend at a baby shower. Oh my goodness. And

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how's she doing? She's doing absolutely fabulous.
She's one of our retirees. That's amazing. We've

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got 2 million people that we serve around
the state of Texas. Half are active members,

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half are retirees. Tell us about the changes
of TRS over the decades. I mean, what stands

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out most when you compare the TRS you joined
40 years ago to the TRS of today? Well, quite a

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few things. The first thing is when I joined TRS
back in 1986, you know, we had probably 146,000

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annuitants. Now we have over 523,000 annuitants.
We're paying out over a billion dollars a month in

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benefits. And that's huge. That's a huge number.

And you're talking about the retirees and their

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beneficiaries. Retirees and their beneficiaries.
So anybody who's getting a payment from us. One

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stat that I love is that one in 19 Texans benefit
from TRS directly or indirectly across the state.

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Absolutely. That's phenomenal to so many people
that we that we touch that way. It is. And you

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know, you could go anywhere and you can, you
know, meet anybody who is a member, whether

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they're a teacher, support staff, or whatever they
do at the school systems. I mean, they're members

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of TRS. You really can. As membership has grown,
how have member needs changed over time? I mean,

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it used to be a lot more paper. Yeah. When I
started, it was all paper. And then, of course,

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you know, my favorite was the microfiche machine.
And people don't even know what that is anymore,

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but that's how we used to analyze files...is we
would look at the microfiche and look at their

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history and then we would look at the school
reports that came in, the monthly reports, and

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that's on a big tape. And so we'd have to go down
and roll that tape like you're watching a movie.

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So it was, I mean, it was very different and we

were very paper driven and so we had to look for,

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you know, the files and they were kept in file cabinets and then once a member had retired then

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we put those on microfiche and that's how we looked at the historical data. But it's changed

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a lot. We've had, you know, we went from these little bitty monitors where we looked at member

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information on mainframe applications and you had to know each and every command that was on there.

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And there was a lot you had to learn. We also had to calculate, learn how to calculate benefits by

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hand before we could ever put it in the computer because if you don't know how to do it by hand,

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how are you going to tell if the computer's wrong? No kidding. So, those are some things that we

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did differently. But as far as TRS changing, we've always been member centric. And that was

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one of the things that I loved about TRS when I started working here. When I started working here,

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I didn't know anything about TRS. I knew nothing. I thought they were just teachers. I had never

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heard about teacher retirement system, but I was looking for a job. I needed a job while I went to

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school at night. And so one of the ladies that I

worked with at a temp agency directed me to work

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in Texas and I got interviewed at TRS and I came on just in a, you know, entry level position and

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now I'm chief benefit officer and so I've done, you know, a little bit of everything on the member

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services side because that's where my career is. 250 employees when I started. And now we're

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1,200 or so. More than 1,200 if you include the contractors, we're pretty high up there. And you

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know we had \$11 billion in funds. Our pension fund was \$11 billion and now we're in excess of \$220

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billion. Yeah. It's a lot of money and that's a lot of change. Billion, with a B. Yes, absolutely.

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And we had, you know, we had probably over 523,000...529,000 members back then and we have

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2.3 million now. So, it's a big change. I mean, it's grown. The system has grown tremendously.

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And a lot of that involves, you know, just growth from a state perspective. At the moment, last time

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I looked at the stats, Texas is still healthy and growing and so that means more members are joining

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TRS every year. How does this podcast do you think help meet our members evolving needs, you know,

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meeting them where they are? I think it's just

another avenue of communication and how we can

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get benefit information out to our members. You know, we still have people who want to visit

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with somebody in person. You're always going to have that. And one thing that we do in pension

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services, as we roll out different ways for members to communicate, we can't shut down a way

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we've been using because people are still using. It doesn't decrease any volume in that area,

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it just adds another channel for members who want to reach us in the channel that's comfortable to

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them. That's where, to me, where we meet members where they are. We give them the avenues that

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they need or that they want to use to communicate with us. So we have email through the web portal,

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through the MyTRS, where they can send a secure email. We have our contact center where they can

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call and talk to somebody. We have our, you know, MyTRS portal where they can go in and

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look at information, calculate their benefits. We have our website that has many publications on it

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and people can write in and ask for information. They can send us the secured email. Eventually at

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some point they might have chat. And then we have

the podcast and we have benefit presentations and

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we've taken our benefit presentations and we've chunked those up into little mini sessions. So,

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we're doing Wednesday webinars now that just give one piece of that information. And so,

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as people, you know, change and they evolve in their career or they move, there may be one other

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thing that they're interested in learning about. And so, instead of sitting through

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a two-hour presentation, then they can listen to just the piece that they need to listen to.

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But then having, you know, so many things out there on our website that can guide them and

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give them information. We do virtual sessions. We do in-person benefit presentations. You know,

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we get invited by public school employers to come out and do presentations for folks. And

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so we have a regional office and we're getting ready to open our second regional office. We're in

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the process of doing that now. And so that meets those members who takes more than five hours to

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get to headquarters. If they wanted to meet with a person, it gives them a place to go and meet with

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one of our counselors if that's what they choose

to do. We also offer virtual office visits where

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they can be at their home visiting with somebody through a camera, through the Zoom. We also have

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telephone if they'd rather just talk to somebody and have an office visit through the telephone,

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we do that as well. Such a broad reach and it's expanded in the last number of years. So, you

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mentioned the regional offices, El Paso, and now the Valley. Yeah, Rio Grand Valley. And so really

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reaching members where they are and going to them. And I know we have road shows too with our

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health division. And also with pension. We travel every year to different areas in Texas and we do,

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sometimes, we do presentations twice or sometimes three times a year depending on the demand from

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our members. And so we have office visits so people can schedule a field office visit with

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us. They can also watch one of our presentations. It's amazing. And I know the communications just

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keeps getting better and better. Let's talk about membership 101 to give it a subtitle. Let's get

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into membership, specifically. Who is TRS for? There's the K-12 public school employees as well

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as some higher education faculty staff. So, who,

let's start maybe with the K-12 folks. You know,

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why would someone, you know, get excited about being a part of TRS when they start their teaching

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career or education career? Well, I mean, I think it's interesting that you would ask that question

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because, you know, when I started at TRS, I have the same pension that our members have. I didn't

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think about pension when I was 18 years old. People don't think about that. You're thinking

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about your family. But, a pension is something that there's not that many of those around,

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defined benefit plans anymore. That's going to give you a lifetime benefit. But it's not just

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the defined benefit plan. When somebody starts as a member, you know, they, if they're in a school

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that has ActiveCare, they have health insurance. If they are in the school and something happens

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to them and they pass away and they haven't retired, there's death benefits day one.

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Disability benefits if they become disabled. And so there's many things out there that folks can

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have access to even before they retire. So TRS, is a, would you consider it a lifelong partner

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with our members? It is. It is. It's from day one

when you start your job from day one until your

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last beneficiary passes away if they're getting a monthly benefit once you pass away. And it's

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also a way for your, you know, your family to understand what your benefits are so that

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they can help you. So, we don't only just help our members, we help those beneficiaries. It's

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comfort for the membership. It is. I'm getting a real sense of comfort that has and I think the way

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we've messaged that in the last 5 to 10 years has increased that level of comfort and knowability.

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Yeah, it's life events. I mean, life events change and it's not just the death. Somebody

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could get married and they have to change their name. They could get a divorce, need to change

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their beneficiary. It's just really important for them to understand what is available to them.

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And I think learning that when you first become a member, and I know it's hard in today's economy

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for people to save money, but really if you start now, when you begin your career, you'll be in a

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much better position when you retire. Even just the smallest amount that you can save, can add up

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over time. What's one tip you'd like to share for

members at each stage of the career? Let's start

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off with that 24-25 year old teacher. What would you say to them? Well, I would say to them what I

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say to my own children, if you take it out of your first paycheck, you'll never know you're missing

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it. If you do some other type of 401k...because we're a defined benefit plan and you're by law

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required, if you're in an eligible position, to report to us, but that's your defined benefit plan

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and it's a set plan, but it is lifetime, but that's not going to be what you need probably

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throughout your life to maintain your lifestyle once you retire. So anybody who's starting out,

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the one thing that I would tell them is, you know, start now. Looking at other types of savings, even

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if it's just a very small percent every month. And then, make sure you have your beneficiary up to

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date. Right. Mid-career, that stands to somebody who might want to look into their pension fund

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where they haven't maybe for a few years, looking at that account every year and understanding what

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the combination between salary, service years, that rule of 80. Yeah, I think once somebody's

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even been there five years, it's really important

once they're vested at 5 years, they are eligible

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for benefits. Whether they stay in the school system or not. If they leave and they leave their

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money here, at some point they're going to reach eligibility and they would get a lifetime benefit.

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So, I think once you have your 5 years of service, it's really important that you at least attend one

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of our sessions just to see what the pension's all about and how it's calculated and what we look at.

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And then once you're 10 years, then I would look at the whole thing again because every time you go

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to a presentation, you learn something different because your mind is on something different at the

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time that you are watching that presentation. That's the key thing. It's like watching a

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movie three years later. It's like I didn't notice that detail before, or the rules may have changed

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a little bit. Right. Absolutely. And we have legislation every 2 years. Not that legislation

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changes every 2 years, but when I started, we had one formula, one eligibility requirement, and now

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we have six tiers of eligibility. Someone who's late in their career, getting close to retirement,

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I know they might want to be looking at benefit

options and retirement eligibility dates. Right.

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Anything else? Yeah, retirement eligibility. Also, health care. Are you going to be eligible for

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health care? Because those rules have changed over time as well. And so just to make sure that you

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meet that eligibility if you need health care upon retirement, you know, that's something that we

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see people, you know, they care about what they're going to get so they can maintain their lifestyle,

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but they also want to know what are their benefits are going to be if they need health

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care. And for our 529,000 annuitants. The advice for them would be what - stay connected with TRS

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obviously and you mentioned legislative changes. Yeah, absolutely. You know, read our newsletters.

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We have videos on our website, employment after retirement videos where you can watch and it talks

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about, you know, what can you do and what can't you do depending on how long you've been retired.

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Let's take things on a little personal tack now. Is there a personal story that you want to share

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that really reflects your time at TRS or the story that's really stayed with you that reminds

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you that this work matters to you? You know, Rob,

there are so many because I spent the majority of

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my career in benefit counseling, which was working directly with members, whether I was a counselor,

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I was in the leadership role there, and I still have members that call me because I worked with

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them back in the 2000s and helped them retire and they still have my number. I have the same

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number I had. So, people will call me and ask me questions. But I think the one thing that stuck

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with me the most is about probably right after I took the job as the chief benefit officer, I

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had a gentleman that reached out to me and he was reporting the death of his wife. And I remembered

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this gentleman because he started talking about how he and his wife had visited with me in my

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office in Austin and how we had talked about their benefits and their farm and you know the things

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that they were going to do after they retired and they were just the cutest, sweetest little couple.

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Well, he call to report his wife's death. And I think that probably hit me more emotionally than

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any call that I had because he was just...I just remembered how sweet they were and they were just

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the most precious couple. And you know, and he

lost her. They had been married up more than 60

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years. And so they had been together since they were children. He called - child bride is what

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he called her. And it was just really, you know, I felt emotional about it because he still had

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my number and he called me to report the death so I could guide him through that process. And

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so that one will always stick out to me. I tell you, it's so rewarding for me working at TRS now

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for a number of years to meet our members, even in the courtyard here at our headquarters in Austin,

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coming in from, I don't know, out of town perhaps, you know, Abilene someplace or

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another part of Texas, in to visit to, maybe it's their first visit to TRS and to meet us

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face-to-face and I'm always just so touched and thrilled to see the faces of the people that we

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serve every day. Last question for you, Barbie. How do we maintain trust with those folks? Well,

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I think it's really important that they get good service and they get accurate information. Now,

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do we get it right 100% of the time? No. We like to, we want to be 100% perfection, but in reality,

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that's not going to happen. We're humans just like

everybody else. But I think, you know, for our

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members, you know, having that resource available to guide them through the process or answer any

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question, even if they're not retiring, they could have a question about purchasing service

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credit or do they have credit for something that they did back when they first started

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and weren't a teacher at the time? You know, what do they have in the system and what do I need to

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do? What do you look at when you when you retire? And they're doing their planning. But, you know,

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by us to provide good customer service and, like I tell our folks when they first start, you know,

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I meet all of our folks in customer service and I tell them, you know, you're sometimes you're

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the only interaction that our members will have with TRS. And the impression that you make with

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them gives them the impression of the organization that we are here at TRS. And I think, you know, my

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passion and I know everybody that works here and that's what I love about TRS. Every person that

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you meet, whether they work with the members or not, they know what our mission is and they know

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why we are here. And I think that is so important

that nobody ever forget. When I'm long retired,

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I hope nobody ever forgets the reason that we're here. And we're here for our members. We wouldn't

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have a job if it wasn't for our members. I might summarize it this way. First of all, thank you for

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coming in. It's been an absolute pleasure to spend a few minutes with you. Thanks, Rob. Our closing

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thought. At the end of the day, trust and goodwill come from members knowing that TRS is here for

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them, not just when they retire, but throughout their entire career and beyond. Thanks everybody

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for listening and watching. Till next time. TRS touches nearly every corner of Texas. If today's

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conversation sparked a question or comment, send us a note at communications@trs.texas.gov. Your

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topic might shape a future episode. Until next time, do your homework.