

# SamCERA Times



[www.samcera.org](http://www.samcera.org)

RETIREES & BENEFICIARIES EDITION

March 2009

## COLA increase to be 3% for most retirees

The Board of Retirement has approved a 3% cost of living adjustment (COLA) for most *SamCERA* retirees and beneficiaries. The increase will be effective on all April 2009 payments.

The COLA amount is based on California law, which requires that the amount be based on the change in the Consumer Price Index for the San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose area as calculated by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. The law also requires that the

amount be rounded to the nearest one-half of one percent.

This year the Consumer Price Increase as calculated by *SamCERA's* actuarial firm, Milliman, Inc., showed a 3.11% increase. Per law this number was rounded to 3%.

Some members who retired on or before April 1, 1974, will receive higher amounts.

See the chart below for COLA amounts based on date of retirement, tier and employment category.

### Cost of Living Percentages By Plan

**Plan One.** Each retiree and beneficiary who retired on or before April 1, 2009, will receive a Cost of Living Adjustment in accordance with the following:

Date of Retirement	General	Safety	Probation
On or before 4/1/1972	5.0%	5.0%	3.0%
4/2/1972 to 4/1/1973	4.0%	4.0%	3.0%
4/2/1973 to 4/1/1974	3.5%	3.5%	3.0%
On or after 4/2/1974	3.0%	3.0%	3.0%

**Plan Two.** Plan Two benefits are eligible for no more than a 3% COLA each year. Each retiree and beneficiary who retired on or before April 1, 2009, will receive a Cost of Living Adjustment of 3.0%.

**Plan Three.** Plan Three members are not eligible for Cost of Living Adjustments.

**Plan Four.** Plan Four benefits are eligible for no more than a 2% COLA each year. Each retiree and beneficiary who retired on or before April 1, 2008, will receive a Cost of Living Adjustment of 2.0%.

More COLA information can be found at [www.samcera.org](http://www.samcera.org).

# Questions and Answers about Social Security

By Linda Zamfino

Social Security Administration Public Affairs Specialist in Oakland, CA

If you are eligible for Medicare Part B medical insurance, but didn't sign up when you first became eligible for Medicare, you will have another opportunity to apply. Open season for Medicare Part B runs from January 1 until March 31, 2009. Act early — if you miss the deadline, you will have to wait until 2010 to apply.

Medicare Part B covers some medical expenses not covered by Medicare Part A (hospital insurance), such as doctors' fees, outpatient hospital visits, and other medical services and supplies.

When you first become eligible for hospital insurance (Part A), you have an initial enrollment period of seven-months in which to sign up for medical insurance (Part B)—three months before, the month of, and three months after reaching age 65. After that, you have to pay a higher premium for Part B unless the reason you declined Part B was because you were covered through an employer's group health plan or a group health plan based on a spouse's employment. In that case, you qualify for a *Special Enrollment Period* which allows you to sign up for Part B at any time, as long as you are currently covered under an employer's group health plan, either through your current employer or your spouse's employer -- a retiree plan does not qualify.

You are given another opportunity to enroll in Part B during the general enrollment period, from January 1 to March 31 of each year. But each 12-month period that you are eligible for Medicare Part B and do not sign

up, the amount of your monthly premium increases by 10 percent. (This monthly premium increase does not apply if you qualify and enroll during the *Special Enrollment Period*.)

Medicare is made up of four parts:

Hospital insurance (Part A) that helps pay for inpatient care in a hospital or skilled nursing facility (following a hospital stay), some home health care and hospice care;

Medical insurance (Part B) that helps pay for doctors' services and many other medical services and supplies that are not covered by hospital insurance;

Medicare Advantage (Part C) plans are available in many areas. People with Medicare Parts A and B can choose to receive all of their health care services through one of these provider organizations under Part C; and

Prescription drug coverage (Part D) that helps pay for prescription medications.

In addition, some people with limited income and resources may qualify for extra help to pay for monthly premiums, annual deductibles and co-pays related to their Medicare prescription drug plan (Part D). You can learn more about the extra help at: [www.socialsecurity.gov/prescriptionhelp](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/prescriptionhelp).

You can learn more about Medicare by reading our electronic booklet, *Medicare* at [www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/10043.html](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/10043.html). You can also call us toll-free at 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778) to ask for a copy. Or visit the Medicare website at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov). You can also call Medicare at 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227; TTY 1-877-486-2048).

## Offering the Lure of Lower Taxes

### *Official Looking Notice Mailed to San Mateo County Property Owners*

*The press release below was recently issued by Warren Slocum, San Mateo County Chief Elections Officer & Assessor - County Clerk – Recorder*

Property owners throughout California are the hoped-for customers of private companies who are taking advantage of people during these economically uncertain times. Companies with names like “Tax Review” and “Tax Reassessment” and “Tax Adjusters” are soliciting fees of \$95, \$179, \$209 to file a homeowner’s request for a Decline in Value review **for the 2009-10 Property Assessment.**

“The real estate market downturn has created some sharks — companies that are offering **services that are provided for free by all Assessors’ Offices in California,**” explained Slocum. Some notices are printed on a legal size form that has the homeowner’s name, address and property value information preprinted on the form. Others are printed on multi-page letter size paper. Solicitations include an “estimated tax savings” figure that cites hundred, if not, thousands of dollars, making the fee seem rather paltry. Some of the solicitations compel a property owner to mail their check before a February date to create a false sense of urgency.

**The reality is that homeowners can request a Decline in Value review at any time and do so directly with the Office of the Assessor – free.**

“Don’t be misled into paying someone to file an application for you when we’ll be reviewing your property for free,” warned Slocum, “San Mateo County offers homeowners the ability to fill out an online Decline in Value form. The form takes about 2-3 minutes to complete and a few seconds to be delivered.” And it’s offered in English, Spanish and Chinese. The online Decline-in-Value form is accessible from, [www.smcare.org](http://www.smcare.org). Property owners can also go online and download and print a paper copy of the form if they prefer. They can fax, mail or hand deliver their request.

Once a homeowner submits a request, they will receive an email confirmation or phone call that advises them of a date when they can expect to learn of the status of their request.

If their request has merit, the property assessed value will be reduced. If the parties disagree, further discussions will take place to ensure that everything is understood. If the Decline in Value request is ultimately denied, the homeowner still has the option to file an appeal before the San Mateo County Assessment Appeals Board, an independent body appointed by the Board of Supervisors that rules on these matters.

Calls have poured into the Assessor’s Office and the Tax Collector’s Office from homeowners confused by these notices. “It is unfortunate that some of the homeowners have already signed the form and mailed in their payment to these companies” explained Angelina Hunter, Deputy Assessor-County Clerk-Recorder.

Some of the firms offer to represent the homeowner before a Hearing Officer of the Clerk of the Board who decides the outcome of the formal appeal explaining that a homeowner need not appear themselves. Slocum thought it to be a highly unusual offer to travel from thousands of miles to represent a client before the Appeals Board for a minimal fee. “If something doesn’t sound right, chances are it isn’t right. People should trust their instincts, call us and check it out before they send anyone money for these services.”

Particularly susceptible to this kind of solicitation are first generation immigrants, brand new homeowners and widows who left financial matters to their spouses – all for the very same reason, they are unfamiliar with property taxes, property tax programs and assessments. “The sad part is that often the people preyed upon are the most vulnerable and at-risk property owners who would most benefit from a homeowner’s exemption,” said Slocum.

Property owners are encouraged to contact the Assessor’s Office to find out if they have questions or need help in filling out the Decline-in-Value form. Online forms are available in English, Spanish and Chinese from the homepage of [www.smcare.org](http://www.smcare.org). Property owners can call (650) 363-4500 for assistance.

## A good time was had by all at 2008 SCORPA Holiday Luncheon

Gifts, music, singing and a delicious meal were all part of the Holiday Luncheon held by the San Mateo County Retired Personnel Association (SCORPA) in December. Below, John Murphy, Retiree Alternate Trustee on the *SamCERA* Board,



presents a raffle prize. Above, organist Manny Jimenez entertains the group before the meal. SCORPA represents retirees' interests and provides educational and social events. To join: send \$12 (annual dues) to SCORPA, PO Box 3603, Redwood City, CA 94063.

**SamCERA**



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