

# retirement plan for military

**retirement plan for military** personnel is a critical aspect of service, offering a pathway to financial security after dedicated years of duty. Understanding the intricacies of these plans is paramount for service members to make informed decisions about their financial future. This comprehensive article delves into the various components and considerations of a retirement plan for military members, covering essential topics such as the Blended Retirement System, the legacy system, Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) contributions, and healthcare benefits. We will also explore important factors like vesting periods, service-specific benefits, and strategies for maximizing retirement savings. Whether you are an active duty member, a reservist, or considering a transition to civilian life, this guide aims to provide a clear and detailed overview of your military retirement planning options.

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## Understanding Military Retirement Systems

The landscape of military retirement has evolved, primarily with the introduction of the Blended Retirement System (BRS). This system aims to provide a retirement benefit to a larger percentage of service members, including those who do not complete 20 years of active service. Before the BRS, the traditional "legacy" system was the sole option, rewarding longer careers with a more substantial pension. Understanding the fundamental differences between these two systems is the first step in effectively planning for your military retirement.

The choice between the BRS and the legacy system can significantly impact the retirement income a service member receives. Factors such as length of service, rank achieved, and contribution to the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) all play a crucial role in determining the ultimate retirement benefit. Both systems offer distinct advantages, and for those who entered service after a certain date, the BRS is the default. However, some service members had the option to elect into the BRS.

# The Blended Retirement System (BRS)

The Blended Retirement System (BRS) is designed to offer a more portable and flexible retirement benefit. Introduced in 2018, it combines a traditional defined benefit pension with a defined contribution component, the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). This system recognizes that many service members transition to civilian careers before reaching the 20-year mark typically required for full pension benefits under the legacy system.

## Key Features of the BRS

The BRS introduces several key features that differentiate it from the legacy system. A primary component is the automatic government contribution to a service member's TSP account. For those who serve at least two years, the government automatically contributes 1% of their basic pay. This is in addition to any matching contributions.

Another significant aspect of the BRS is the matching contribution to the TSP. After a service member completes two years of service, the government will match TSP contributions dollar-for-dollar up to 5% of basic pay. This means that if a service member contributes 5% of their pay, the government will contribute an additional 5%, doubling their contribution in this portion of the plan. This matching is a powerful incentive for service members to actively save and invest in their future.

## BRS Pension Eligibility

Under the BRS, service members who complete at least 20 years of qualifying service are eligible for a monthly pension. However, the pension calculation is different from the legacy system. The pension amount is based on a percentage of the average of the highest 36 months of basic pay, multiplied by a service multiplier. For those who serve 20 years, the multiplier is 40%. This multiplier increases by 1% for each additional year of service beyond 20, up to a maximum of 50% for 30 years of service.

It's important to note that the BRS pension is reduced for those retiring with fewer than 30 years of service compared to the legacy system. For example, a member retiring with 20 years under BRS will receive 40% of their high-3 average, whereas under the legacy system, 20 years would equate to 50%. This difference is offset by the increased emphasis on the TSP component of the BRS.

# **The Legacy Retirement System**

The legacy retirement system, also known as the High-3 system, has been the standard for military retirement for many years. It is a defined benefit plan, meaning it promises a specific monthly income for life after completing 20 years of qualifying service. This system is still in effect for service members who entered service before the implementation of the BRS and chose not to elect into the BRS.

## **Legacy Pension Calculation**

The pension under the legacy system is calculated by multiplying a service multiplier by the average of a service member's highest 36 months of basic pay. For 20 years of service, the multiplier is 50%. This multiplier increases by 2.5% for each additional year of service beyond 20 years, up to a maximum of 75% for 30 years of service. This means that longer careers under the legacy system yield a significantly higher percentage of your final pay as a retirement annuity.

The legacy system offers a guaranteed income stream for life, which can be a significant advantage for those who remain in the military for an extended period. The predictability of this income can simplify long-term financial planning and provide a strong sense of security in retirement. However, it is less portable for those who leave service before the 20-year mark.

## **Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) for Military Personnel**

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a defined contribution retirement savings plan for federal employees and members of the uniformed services. It is an essential component of the Blended Retirement System and a valuable savings tool for all service members, regardless of which retirement system they are under. The TSP allows service members to save for retirement on a tax-deferred basis, with potential for government matching contributions.

## **Understanding TSP Contributions**

Service members can contribute a portion of their basic pay, special pay, incentive pay, and hazardous duty pay to their TSP accounts. Contributions are made on a pre-tax basis, meaning they reduce your current taxable income. This tax deferral allows your investments to grow over time without being immediately subject to taxes.

The maximum contribution limits for TSP are set annually by the IRS. For example, in 2023, the employee contribution limit was \$22,500, with an additional catch-up contribution allowed for those aged 50 and over. Understanding these limits is crucial for maximizing your retirement savings potential through the TSP.

## **TSP Investment Options**

The TSP offers a range of investment options, including several low-cost, diversified index funds. These include the G Fund (government securities), F Fund (fixed income), C Fund (common stock index), S Fund (small capitalization stock index), and I Fund (international stock index). Service members can choose to invest in individual funds or opt for a lifecycle fund, which automatically adjusts its asset allocation based on the participant's age and expected retirement date.

Choosing the right investment strategy is a critical part of maximizing your TSP returns. Factors such as your risk tolerance, time horizon, and financial goals should be considered when selecting your investment mix. Many service members benefit from consulting with a financial advisor or utilizing the resources provided by the TSP to make informed investment decisions.

## **Healthcare Benefits in Retirement**

Healthcare is a significant consideration for any retirement plan, and military members have access to unique benefits. Understanding TRICARE eligibility and options in retirement is crucial for budgeting and financial planning. TRICARE is the healthcare program for uniformed service members, retirees, and their families.

### **TRICARE Options for Retirees**

Retirees who have earned a pension (typically 20 years of service) generally have access to TRICARE Prime, a managed care option that provides comprehensive healthcare coverage. This option is usually available at no monthly premium for retirees and their families, though there may be annual enrollment fees and cost-shares for certain services.

For those who do not qualify for a pension or choose not to enroll in TRICARE Prime, there are other TRICARE options, such as TRICARE Select, which offers more flexibility in choosing providers but typically involves higher out-of-pocket costs. Additionally, some retirees may be eligible for Medicare, and understanding how TRICARE coordinates with Medicare is essential for optimizing healthcare coverage.

and costs.

## **Vesting Periods and Eligibility**

Vesting refers to the period of service required to earn a non-forfeitable right to certain retirement benefits. Understanding vesting periods is crucial for all service members, as it dictates when you can expect to receive benefits if you leave the military before completing a full career.

### **Retirement Vesting in the BRS**

Under the Blended Retirement System, service members become vested in the government's TSP contributions after two years of service. This means that any matching contributions made by the government, and the earnings on those contributions, are yours to keep even if you leave the service before completing 20 years. The pension benefit under the BRS, however, still requires 20 years of qualifying service for eligibility.

### **Retirement Vesting in the Legacy System**

The legacy retirement system requires 20 years of active duty service for a service member to be vested in the pension benefit. If a service member leaves the military with fewer than 20 years of service under the legacy system, they will not receive a monthly pension annuity. However, any contributions made by the service member to their TSP account are always theirs, regardless of their years of service.

## **Service-Specific Retirement Benefits**

Beyond the core retirement systems, certain branches of the military or specific service obligations may offer additional retirement benefits or incentives. These can include special pay, bonuses, or educational benefits that can supplement overall retirement planning and financial well-being.

### **Special Duty Pay and Bonuses**

Many service members participate in programs that offer special duty pay or enlistment/reenlistment bonuses. While these are often considered immediate compensation, they can also be factored into long-

term financial planning. Some bonuses may have service commitment clauses that, if fulfilled, contribute to retirement eligibility or enhance the overall financial package upon separation.

## **Educational Benefits and Retirement**

Programs like the Montgomery GI Bill and Post-9/11 GI Bill provide significant educational benefits that can be used for college, vocational training, or other educational pursuits. While not direct retirement income, these benefits can reduce future educational expenses for service members or their dependents, indirectly enhancing their retirement savings and financial flexibility. Understanding how to best utilize these benefits can be a strategic advantage.

## **Maximizing Your Military Retirement Plan**

Effective planning is key to maximizing the benefits of your military retirement plan. This involves making informed decisions about contributions, investments, and understanding all available benefits. Proactive engagement with your financial future will lead to greater security in retirement.

## **Strategic TSP Contributions**

For those in the BRS, contributing at least 5% to the TSP to receive the full government match is a fundamental strategy. Beyond the match, consider increasing your contributions as your income grows and financial obligations allow. Taking advantage of catch-up contributions in later career years is also a wise move. Regularly reviewing your TSP investment allocation to ensure it aligns with your risk tolerance and time horizon is also crucial.

Even for those in the legacy system, contributing to the TSP is highly recommended. While the pension provides a substantial income floor, additional savings in the TSP can provide greater financial flexibility, allow for earlier retirement, or provide a cushion for unexpected expenses. It offers a complementary savings vehicle to the defined benefit pension.

## **Leveraging Additional Savings Tools**

Beyond the TSP, explore other savings and investment vehicles that can complement your military retirement plan. This could include Individual Retirement Arrangements (IRAs), brokerage accounts, or real estate investments, depending on your financial situation and risk appetite. Diversifying your

retirement savings can reduce overall risk and potentially increase your overall return.

## **Transitioning to Civilian Retirement Planning**

As a military career draws to a close, transitioning to civilian retirement planning requires a thoughtful approach. Understanding how your military benefits translate to civilian life and integrating them with new financial strategies is essential for a smooth and secure retirement.

The skills and discipline developed during military service are invaluable assets in civilian life and can be applied to managing your retirement finances effectively. This includes maintaining a budget, continuing to save, and seeking professional financial advice when needed. The foundation laid by your military retirement plan, combined with diligent civilian planning, can lead to a comfortable and fulfilling retirement.

The transition period often involves navigating new employment opportunities, understanding civilian healthcare options, and potentially consolidating financial assets. A well-prepared service member will approach this phase with a clear understanding of their existing benefits and a proactive plan for their future financial endeavors.

## **FAQ**

### **Q: What is the main difference between the Blended Retirement System (BRS) and the Legacy Retirement System?**

A: The primary difference lies in how benefits are calculated and the emphasis on savings. The Legacy System is a defined benefit plan requiring 20 years of service for a pension, while the BRS is a hybrid system combining a smaller pension (requiring 20 years) with a strong emphasis on the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) with government matching contributions from the start.

### **Q: At what point are military members eligible for a pension under the Blended Retirement System?**

A: Military members are eligible for a pension under the Blended Retirement System after completing 20 years of qualifying service. However, the pension amount is calculated differently and is generally lower for 20 years of service compared to the Legacy System, with greater reliance on the TSP.

**Q: Does the government contribute to my Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) if I am in the Blended Retirement System?**

A: Yes, under the Blended Retirement System, the government automatically contributes 1% of your basic pay after two years of service. Additionally, the government will match your contributions dollar-for-dollar up to 5% of your basic pay after two years of service.

**Q: How does healthcare work for military retirees?**

A: Military retirees who have earned a pension (typically 20 years of service) are generally eligible for TRICARE Prime, a comprehensive healthcare program. Depending on eligibility and location, other TRICARE options like TRICARE Select may also be available. Coordination with Medicare is often necessary for retirees who are Medicare-eligible.

**Q: Can I contribute to the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) if I am under the Legacy Retirement System?**

A: Absolutely. Service members under the Legacy Retirement System can and should contribute to the TSP. While the Legacy System provides a pension, the TSP offers an additional savings vehicle for wealth accumulation and greater financial flexibility in retirement.

**Q: What is the vesting period for TSP contributions under the Blended Retirement System (BRS)?**

A: Under the BRS, service members are vested in the government's TSP contributions after two years of service. This means that any matching contributions made by the government, and the earnings on those contributions, are yours to keep even if you leave the military before completing 20 years of service.

**Q: Are there any specific benefits for reservists or National Guard members regarding retirement plans?**

A: Yes, reservists and National Guard members can earn retirement points throughout their careers for drills, active duty, and training. These points, when accumulated to a sufficient level (typically 20 qualifying years), can entitle them to a retired pay annuity at age 60, or earlier in certain cases of active duty contingency operations. They can also participate in the TSP.



## Q: How do I decide if the Blended Retirement System (BRS) is better for me than the Legacy System?

A: The BRS generally benefits service members who may not serve 20 years, as it offers portability and immediate government TSP contributions. The Legacy System may be more advantageous for those who plan to serve 20 or more years, especially for longer careers beyond 20 years, due to its higher pension multipliers. A detailed comparison of estimated benefits based on your specific career path is recommended.

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here you are. You're preparing to retire and begin the next stage of your life. Time to get out that retirement checklist and begin working through it. What's that? You don't have a checklist? That's okay, the Army has one for you. Oh wait. No, they don't. I was surprised when I found out that there isn't a comprehensive roadmap for the retirement process. *Military Retirement: A Modern Guide to Navigating the Army Retirement System* was born from that frustration as I went through the process and collected my thoughts into a series of emails to colleagues. This in-depth guide includes:

- Retirement Packet - We show you the requirements, with examples for your packet.
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- Your Second Career - If you decide to work after you retire, you may need some significant assistance getting yourself ready for the civilian world. Be sure to check this section out!
- Retirement Checklist - Even if you only have a few minutes of spare time, the retirement checklist provided in this guide will help to set you up for success!

Get an inside look at the retirement process through the recent, real-world experience of the author as he answers the questions that you didn't even know you had, and those that instructors at SFL-TAP simply don't know the answer to.

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of deceased retirees. The amount of compensation is dependent on time served, basic pay at retirement, and annual Cost-of-Living-Adjustments (COLAs). Military retirees are also entitled to nonmonetary benefits including exchange and commissary privileges, medical care through TRICARE, and access to Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) facilities and programs. Currently, active component personnel are eligible for retirement (i.e., vested) after completing 20 years of service (YOS). Reserve personnel are eligible for retirement after 20 years of creditable service based on a points system, but do not typically begin to draw retirement pay until age 60. A third category of retirement is disability retirement. In FY2016, approximately \$57 billion was paid to 2.3 million military retirees and survivors. Given the size of the program, some have viewed military retirement as a place where substantial budgetary savings could be made. However, others have argued that past modifications intended to save money have had a deleterious effect on military recruiting and retention. Military retirees, families, and veterans' service organizations closely monitor potential changes to the retirement system. When considering alternatives to the current system, Congress may choose to consider the balance between military retirement system as a retention incentive, budget constraints, and the needs and concerns of their constituents.

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