

**Statement of Sam Ball**  
**Retired Coal Miner**  
**Before the**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources**  
**H.R. 934, the Health Benefits for Miners Act of 2019, and**  
**H.R. 935, the Miners Pension Protection Act of 2019**  
**July 24, 2019**

Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for asking me to be here today. I am from St. Charles, Virginia, just a few miles from the Kentucky border in the far southwest corner of Virginia.

I went to work in the coal mines in September, 1975, at the Shackleford Coal Company in Kentucky, where I worked for nine months before I was laid off. Then in June, 1976, I was hired by the Westmoreland Coal Company at their Holton mine in Virginia, where I worked until the mine shut down in 1995. I worked as a General Inside Laborer, Roof Bolter, Shuttle Car Operator and finally as a Shearer Operator on the longwall. I was also on the Health and Safety Committee of my Local Union, which meant I travelled with federal safety inspectors underground whenever they were in the mine.

I was only injured once while working underground, which is not too bad compared to some of my former co-workers. I have arthritis from all the walking I did underground with the safety inspectors. I take three pain pills per day for that but refuse to take any more because I do not want to get addicted to them like so many others in our area. Every three months I have to get injections for my arthritis, two in my right ankle and one in my right hip. I take several other medications for other conditions I have, including balance issues for which I need very expensive eardrops. I also go to physical therapy every week for my balance.

I have second stage black lung in both lungs, but have been turned down for federal black lung benefits because the government says the coal dust has not yet crystallized in my lungs and I am not disabled enough to get those benefits yet. My lung doctor says there is no reason I should be denied benefits, but the truth is what has happened to me is not unusual. Most people I know with black lung are denied benefits. I can tell you that I cannot walk across my yard without stopping, I do not have the breath for any activities, I sleep with an oxygen tube in my nose at night and I need a sleeping supplement to deal with that.

I clear \$475 per month from my pension, after taxes. I have a small pension from the Virginia Department of Corrections, where I worked for 10 years after my mine shut down, and I receive Social Security. That's it. I only just break even every month, I do not have any savings to speak of. My home and my car are the only assets I have. Any reduction of any of those sources of income will have a severe impact on me.

I am one of those 1,200 retirees who need you to pass both H.R. 934 and H.R. 935, because both our retiree health care and our pensions are on the chopping block. If I were to lose

my health care I don't have the resources to purchase a plan to make up the difference between what Medicare pays and what I need, especially in terms of the prescriptions medications I have. And to see my pension wiped out or even cut would mean that I would no longer break even, meaning I would soon have to sell my home and go live with my daughter, if she could even take me in with three children of her own.

This is not what I expected would happen in my old age when I started working in the coal mines. We all knew of the government's promise to coal miners, which was to make sure that our retirement would be guaranteed if the company we worked for was no longer around. I worked hard for almost 21 years underground, put my life and my health on the line every day and helped Westmoreland Coal make a lot of money.

Every contract we ratified said that we were guaranteed health care for life, and a pension. We agreed to that, even taking less in wages than we could have, because we knew we would need help in retirement when we were old. But somehow, a bankruptcy judge took that all away. I don't understand how that can happen in America.

There are hundreds more who are in my situation, or worse, in the communities around where I live. And there are tens of thousands more across America who do not have the ability to survive without their pension, or even a cut in their pension. Many of them don't have a second pension, like I do from the Department of Corrections. I frankly don't know how they make it even now.

Many more are widows of coal miners, and they really have almost nothing because most of them never worked so they don't have any Social Security of their own. They live on a reduced widow's UMWA pension and reduced Social Security from their deceased miner husband and that's all.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, every single one of us needs our health care and our pensions. Every single one of us believed our government's promise to us and planned our retirement years based on that promise. Every single one of us is a patriotic, proud American who cannot understand how there are people in Washington who are willing to turn their backs to us.

For my own part, and on behalf of not just the Westmoreland retirees who are losing their health care but also every retired coal miner in America whose pension is at risk, I urge you to take action as soon as possible to get both of these bills passed. Our lives are at stake. You are our last hope.

Thank you, and I will answer any questions you may have as best I can.