

What the SECURE Act could Mean to You and Fire Service Families.

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2020 will go down in history as a traumatic and difficult year. Outside all the media attention on COVID-19 and the passage of the highly publicized Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act most people were unaware of the passage on December 20, 2019- of the Setting Every Community Up for Retirement Enhancement (SECURE) Act. The significance of this new \$ 1.4 trillion spending package is far reaching. The SECURE Act represents the most sweeping set of changes to retirement legislation in more than a decade.

The SECURE Act was designed as a partial solution to the broken retirement system plaguing today's aging U. S . population. Most of you as first responders will retire with pensions and some of you will receive a reduced benefit (WEP/GPO) from Social Security for work outside the fire service. However, the average Americans monthly Social Security benefit for someone age 65 is currently \$ 1,273.

As we all were told when we were young, Social Security is intended only to be a supplement to the personal savings workers accumulate during their careers. Yet the statistics show a significant shortfall in the amount of savings workers have been able to dedicate to retirement accounts: According to the wealth management firm Vanguard, the median 401k balance for its clients age 65 and older is just a bit more than \$58,000, which poses slim prospects for the comfort and stability of those individuals as retirement wears on.

To address what many financial experts call a "retirement crisis," the SECURE Act has imposed several changes to wealth management in America. These changes are designed to improve retirement savings opportunities for the current U. S. workforce while also offering new benefits to retirees looking to preserve and extend the value of their current retirement funds.

This article is designed to "familiarize" you with some of the tax law changes enacted under the SECURE ACT. My next article in "The Gong" will be a deeper look at some of the SECURE Act retirement law changes and how they may alter first responder retirement/financial planning strategies in the future.

Here are some of the significant SECURE Act changes:
Elimination of the "stretch IRA"

Perhaps the change requiring the most urgent attention is the elimination of longstanding provisions allowing **non-spouse beneficiaries** who inherit traditional IRA and retirement plan assets to spread distributions — and therefore the tax obligations associated with them — over their lifetimes. This ability to spread out taxable distributions after the death of an IRA owner or retirement plan participant, over what was potentially such a long period of time, was often referred to as the "stretch IRA" rule.

The new law, however, generally requires any beneficiary who is more than 10 years younger than the account owner to liquidate the account within 10 years of the account owner's death unless the beneficiary is a spouse, a disabled or chronically ill individual, or a minor child. This shorter maximum distribution period could result in unanticipated tax bills for beneficiaries who stand to inherit high-value traditional IRAs. This is also true for IRA trust beneficiaries, which may affect estate plans that intended to use trusts to manage inherited IRA assets.

In addition to possibly reevaluating beneficiary choices, traditional IRA owners may want to revisit how IRA dollars fit into their overall estate planning strategy. For example, it may make sense to consider the possible implications of converting traditional IRA funds to Roth IRAs, which can be inherited income tax free. Although Roth IRA conversions are taxable events, investors who spread out a series of conversions over the next several years may benefit from the lower income tax rates that are set to expire in 2026.

Benefits to individuals

On the plus side, the SECURE Act includes several provisions designed to benefit American workers and retirees.

- People who choose to work beyond traditional retirement age will be able to contribute to traditional IRAs beyond age 70½. Previous laws prevented such contributions.
- Retirees will no longer have to take required minimum distributions (RMDs) from traditional IRAs and retirement plans by April 1 following the year

in which they turn 70½. The new law generally requires RMDs to begin by April 1 following the year in which they turn age 72.

- Part-time workers age 21 and older who log at least 500 hours in three consecutive years generally must be allowed to participate in company retirement plans offering a qualified cash or deferred arrangement. The previous requirement was 1,000 hours and one year of service. (The new rule applies to plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2021.)
- Workers will begin to receive annual statements from their employers estimating how much their retirement plan assets are worth, expressed as monthly income received over a lifetime. This should help workers better gauge progress toward meeting their retirement-income goals.
- New laws make it easier for employers to offer lifetime income annuities within retirement plans. Such products can help workers plan for a predictable stream of income in retirement. In addition, lifetime income investments or annuities held within a plan that discontinues such investments can be directly transferred to another retirement plan, avoiding potential surrender charges and fees that may otherwise apply.
- Individuals can now take penalty-free early withdrawals of up to \$5,000 from their qualified plans and IRAs due to the birth or adoption of a child. (Regular income taxes will still apply, so new parents may want to proceed with caution.)
- Taxpayers with high medical bills may be able to deduct unreimbursed expenses that exceed 7.5% (in 2019 and 2020) of their adjusted gross income. In addition, individuals may withdraw money from their qualified retirement plans and IRAs penalty-free to cover expenses that exceed this threshold (although regular income taxes will apply). The threshold returns to 10% in 2021.
- 529 account assets can now be used to pay for student loan repayments (\$10,000 lifetime maximum) and costs associated with registered apprenticeships.

Benefits to employers

The SECURE Act also helps employers striving to provide quality retirement savings opportunities to their workers. Among the changes are the following:

- The tax credit that small businesses can take for starting a new retirement plan has increased. The new rule allows employers to take a credit equal to the greater of (1) \$500 or (2) the lesser of (a) \$250

times the number of non-highly compensated eligible employees or (b) \$5,000. The credit applies for up to three years. The previous maximum credit amount allowed was 50% of startup costs up to a maximum of \$1,000 (i.e., a maximum credit of \$500).

- A new tax credit of up to \$500 is available for employers that launch a SIMPLE IRA or 401(k) plan with automatic enrollment. The credit applies for three years.
- With regards to the new mandate to permit certain part-timers to participate in retirement plans, employers may exclude such employees for nondiscrimination testing purposes.
- Employers now have easier access to join multiple employer plans (MEPs) regardless of industry, geographic location, or affiliation. "Open MEPs," as they have become known, offer economies of scale, allowing small employers access to the types of pricing models and other benefits typically reserved for large organizations. (Previously, groups of small businesses had to be affiliated somehow to join an MEP.) The legislation also provides that the failure of one employer in an MEP to meet plan requirements will not cause others to fail, and that plan assets in the failed plan will be transferred to another. (This rule is effective for plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2021.)
- Auto-enrollment safe harbor plans may automatically increase participant contributions until they reach 15% of salary. The previous ceiling was 10%.

Given the relative newness of the SECURE Act combined with the emergency passage of the CARES Act in response to financial hardships created by COVID 19- financial experts, accountants and the Internal Revenue Service are still evaluating SECURE Act changes and how they will impact the American taxpayer. There is likely to be a steady stream of guidance from the financial experts, accountants, attorneys with details and advice relating to many of these Secure Act provisions.

New Concept Benefit Group is an independent tax accounting, legal, financial advisory, and financial education firm located in Berwyn, IL. We specialize in serving the unique financial, tax accounting and legal needs of first responders. New Concept Benefit Group can be contacted at www.ncbg.net or via phone at 708-415-0497