

# Benefits for Coal Miners with Black Lung Falling Behind

Tens of thousands of coal miners across the country are disabled by or have died from black lung disease. These miners and their families rely upon black lung benefits to pay for their healthcare and provide monthly compensation as the miner can no longer work. In 1969, when the federal black lung benefits program was created, a miner received \$144.50 each month<sup>1</sup> to help support their cost of living. In today's currency, adjusting for inflation, that would equate to \$1,172.61.<sup>2</sup> While benefits have increased over time, the monthly benefit rate has not kept up with rising inflation (Figure 1). Today, miners receive over 30% less than the value of the original amount, just \$773 a month (Table 1).

**If the stipend had been adjusted for inflation annually, it would be nearly \$1,200 per month today**

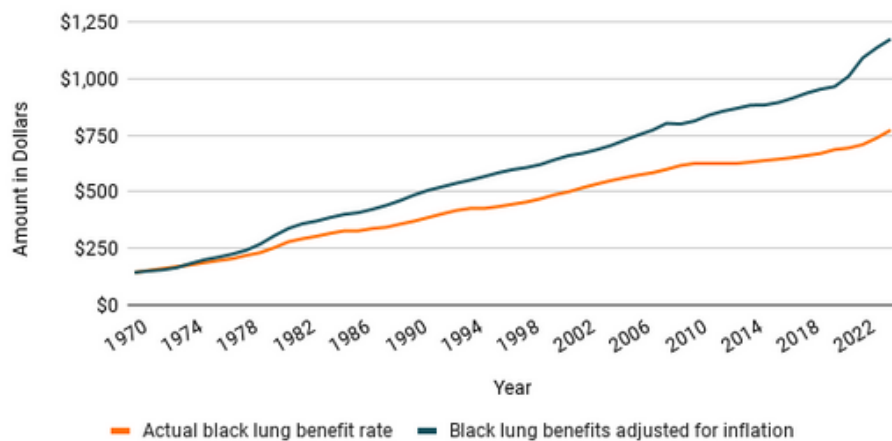


Figure 1: The lower line shows the actual black lung monthly benefit rates for one miner rising from 1969 to 2023. The upper line represents the value of monthly benefit rates if they had kept pace with inflation. Miner benefit levels have not kept pace with inflation and the cost of living.

**Table 1: Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rates, 2019 – 2024<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (1 Miner)	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (Miner + Dependent)
2020	\$687	\$1,030
2021	\$693	\$1,040
2022	\$709	\$1,063
2023	\$738	\$1,107
2024	\$773	\$1,159

<sup>1</sup> See: Adjusted from January 1970 to December 2023 using inflation calculator: <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/current-inflation-rates/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: [https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/DCMWC/benefits\\_part\\_b](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/DCMWC/benefits_part_b)

By law, miner benefit levels are tied to the federal pay scale rather than the cost of living. As inflation levels have skyrocketed, miners' black lung benefits have not kept pace. For example, in 2023 the inflation rate was 8% but miner benefits increased by under 4%. In addition, in years when there is a federal pay freeze, such as 2011 - 2013, black lung benefit levels do not change at all.

Benefit levels have never been sufficient to cover a mining family's cost of living, but now they are falling even further behind. As an example, the current cost of living in the coal-mining counties in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia shown below is approximately three-and-a-half to four times as much as the monthly benefit rate (Figure 2, Table 2).

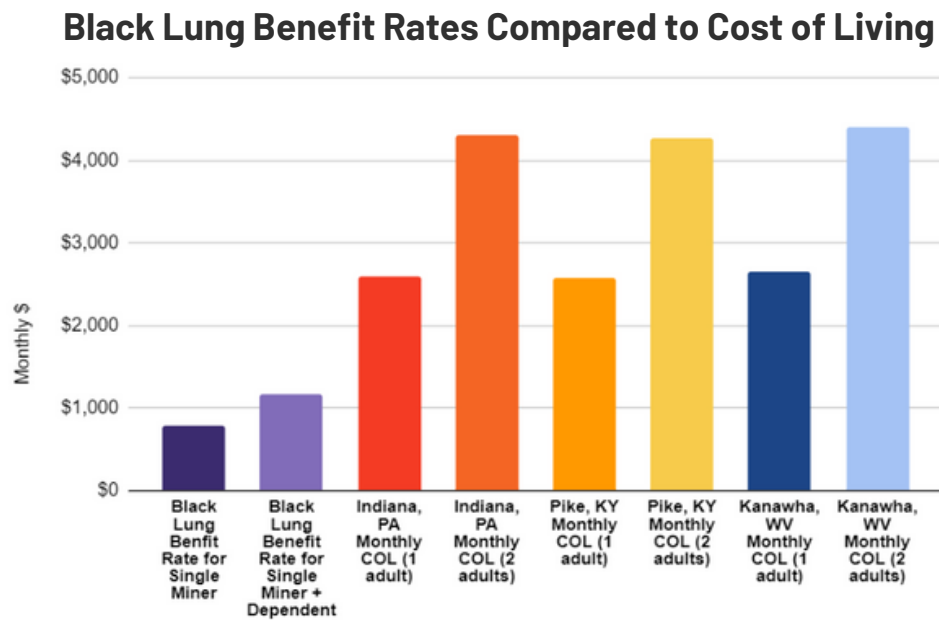


Figure 2: Cost of living for a single person and a single person with a dependent in three coal mining counties compared to monthly black lung benefit rates.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2: 2024 Black Lung Benefit Rates and Cost of Living in 2023 for Three Coal Mining Counties**<sup>3</sup>

Single Miner	Miner + Dependent	Indiana Co., PA COL 1 Adult	Indiana Co., PA COL 2 adults (1 working)	Pike Co., KY COL 1 Adult	Pike Co., KY COL 2 adults (1 working)	Kanawha Co., WV COL 1 Adult	Kanawha Co., WV COL 2 adults (1 working)
\$773	\$1,159	\$2,586	\$4,308	\$2,572	\$4,259	\$2,656	\$4,407

<sup>3</sup> Source Data for Figure 2 and Table 2: Cost of living is calculated on a monthly basis from the typical annual expenses detailed in the MIT living wage calculator for a single adult with no children and two adults (one working) with no children. Accessed via <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>, [https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/DCMWC/benefits\\_part\\_lb](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/DCMWC/benefits_part_lb)

One partial policy solution to this issue is the Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act (BLBIA). The BLBIA would increase benefits to account for years when there was a federal pay freeze and, going forward, tie benefit levels to cost of living adjustments rather than federal pay raises. This will keep benefits from falling further behind. If Congress passes the BLBIA this year, benefits would increase by \$29.70 per month, from \$773 to \$802 per month<sup>4</sup>.

Revenues from the Black Lung Excise Tax can support the increased costs that would be associated with a cost of living adjustment to monthly black lung benefits.

In general, mine operators are responsible for paying black lung benefits, but in cases where no responsible mine operator can be identified – or when mine operators have gone bankrupt and shed their black lung liabilities onto the trust fund – the benefits are paid by the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund. In 2023, the trust fund provided \$137 million in benefits to miners across the country<sup>5</sup>.

In the summer of 2022, Congress raised the black lung excise tax, the only source of revenue for the trust fund. In addition, coal production has expanded over the past several months thereby increasing revenue for the fund. The table below shows the revenue for the fund in recent years. Estimates by the Congressional Budget Office show that increasing monthly benefit levels would cost the fund an additional \$53 million over 10 years, just a little over \$5 million per year.<sup>6</sup> Revenue to the trust fund over the past four years, shown in Table 3, demonstrates that the trust fund can support the modest increase in costs that would be associated with a cost of living adjustment to monthly black lung benefits.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 3: Revenue of the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund<sup>8</sup>**

2020	2021	2022	2023
\$301 million	\$271 million	\$180 million	\$308 million

Miners receiving benefits from the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund live across 46 states and the District of Columbia. Table 4 on the following page shows the top states where miners are receiving benefits for FY23.

<sup>4</sup> According to calculations from The House Committee on Education and the Workforce

<sup>5</sup> Amount does not include benefits paid by responsible coal mine operators and insurers. Source: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/bls2022/DistributionOfClaimsByState2022>

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2022-09/hr6102.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Though the BLDTF is over \$4 billion in debt, since the mid-1990s revenues to the BLDTF have actually exceeded the cost of benefit payments. Interest payments on the BLDTF's outstanding debt kept the fund in a position whereby its total expenditures exceeded its total revenues. For example, in FY 2022, revenues were \$180M and benefit payments cost just \$140M. Congress has forgiven BLDTF debt before and could consider debt forgiveness once again to bring the fund back to solvency. The BLDTF debt was restructured in FY2009, at this time, the cumulative debt was reduced from \$10.4 billion at the end of FY2008 to \$6.2 billion by the end of FY2009. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45261>

<sup>8</sup> Gross Receipts on Monthly Treasury Statements through September of each Fiscal Year: <https://www.fiscal.treasury.gov/reports-statements/mts/>

**Table 4: Disbursements of income and Medical Benefits Paid by the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund During FY23 by State<sup>9</sup>**

States	BLDTF FY 23 Disbursements
Kentucky	\$39 million
West Virginia	\$35 million
Virginia	\$21 million
Pennsylvania	\$14 million
Tennessee	\$5.6 million
Ohio	\$5.2 million
Alabama	\$3.2 million
Illinois	\$2.4 million
Indiana	\$1.7 million
North Carolina	\$1.7 million

## Congress Can Help Miners with Black Lung

Miners and their families do not have to be left behind. Congress can pass legislation to update miners’ black lung benefits by calculating the benefits based on the actual cost of living instead of the current system – which ties benefits to federal employee pay scales, not to inflation. While inflation is a major issue facing every level of government, Congress can respond quickly to protect miners by passing legislation, such as the *Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act*, to update miners’ benefit levels and ensure that the miners with black lung and their families who sacrificed so much for our country have the safety net they deserve.

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<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/bls2022/DistributionOfClaimsByState2022>