Benefits for Coal Miners with Black Lung Falling Behind Rate of Inflation

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[1] to help support their cost of living. In today's currency, adjusting for inflation, that would equate to $1,239.04. While disability benefits have increased over time, the monthly benefit rate has not kept up with rising inflation (Figure 1). Today, miners receive ***nearly 40% less*** than the value of the original amount, just $793.60 a month (Table 1).

If black lung benefit levels had been adjusted for inflation annually, today a miner would receive nearly $1,300 per month

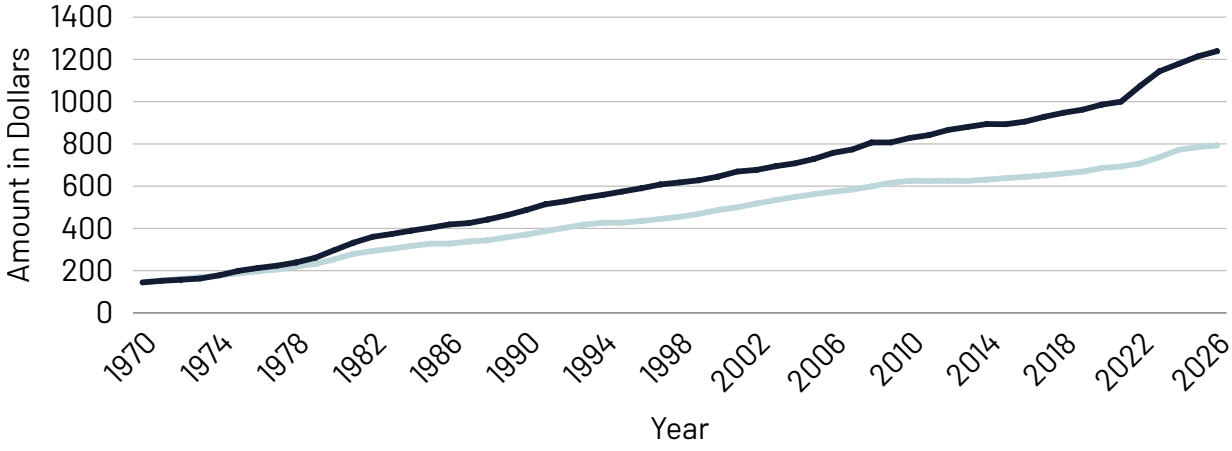

Figure 1: The lower line shows the actual black lung monthly benefit rates for one miner rising from 1969 to 2025. The upper line represents the value of monthly benefit rates if they had kept pace with inflation.

Table 1: Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rates, 2022 – 2026[2]

Year	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (1 Miner)	Black Lung Monthly Benefit Rate (Miner + Dependent)
2022	$709	$1,063
2023	$738	$1,107
2024	$773	$1,159
2025	$785	$1,178
2026	$793	$1,190

1 See: Adjusted from January 1970 to November 2025 using CPI inflation calculator: https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/current-inflation-rates/

2 Source: 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 major 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).

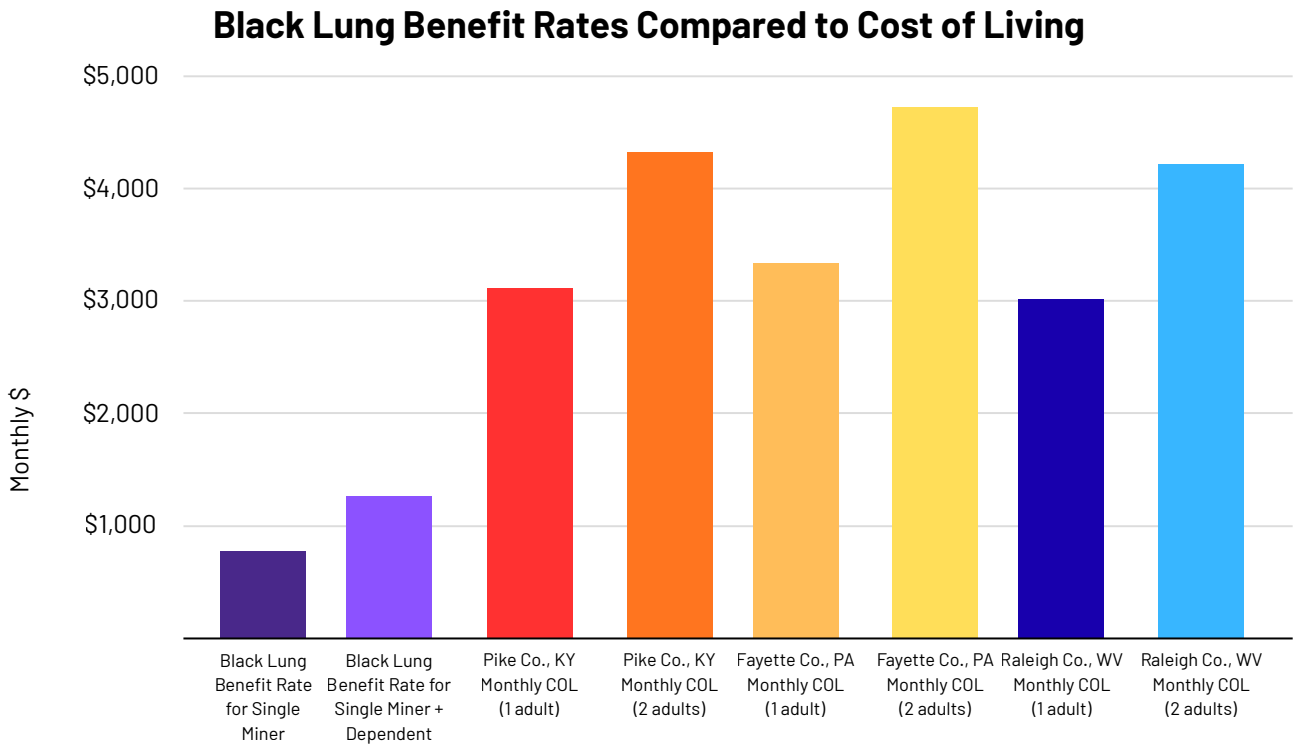

Figure 2: Cost of living for a single person and a single person with a dependent in three coal mining counties compared to monthly black lung benefit rates.[3]

Table 2: 2026 Black Lung Benefit Rates and Cost of Living in 2025 for Three Coal Mining Counties

Single Miner	Miner + Dependent	Pike Co., KY COL 1 Adult	Pike Co., KY COL 2 adults (1 working)	Fayette Co., PA COL 1 Adult	Fayette Co., PA COL 2 adults (1 working)	Raleigh Co., WV COL 1 Adult	Raleigh Co., WV COL 2 adults (1 working)
$793	$1,190	$3,046	$4,344	$3,297	$4,664	$3,040	$4,213

[3] 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_b

One potential 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 ***$103.84 per month***, from $793 to $897.40 per month.

With the re-establishment of the permanent coal excise tax in 2022, revenue 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 2025, the Fund provided $185 million in benefits to miners across the country while bringing in $281 million in estimated revenue.[4]

Table 3: Revenue of the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund by Fiscal Year [5]

2022	2023	2024	2025
$180 million	$295 million	$271 million	$281 million

Table 4: Expenses of the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund by Fiscal Year [6]

2022	2023	2024	2025
$183.5 million	$175.2 million	$175 million	$185 million

The Fund's revenue is obtained through a tax on coal produced and sold domestically. From 1986 through 2018 the tax rate was $1.10 and $0.55 per ton for underground- and surface-mined coal, respectively. In 2019, the coal excise tax was decreased to $0.50 and $0.25 per ton of underground- and surface-mined coal, respectively, and revenue for the Fund dropped from $301 million in FY2020 to $180 million in FY2022. In 2022, when the original rate of the tax was restored, the Fund's revenue returned to its FY2020 levels by FY2023, at $295 million. Since 1989, there have only been two years (1994, 2022) where benefit expenses outpaced Fund revenue.

Miners receiving benefits from the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund live across 45 states and the District of Columbia. Table 4 on the following page shows the top states where miners are receiving benefits for FY25.

4 Amount does not include benefits paid by responsible coal mine operators and insurers. Source: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/bls2025/DistributionOfClaimsByState2025

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

6 Division of Coal Mine Workers' Compensation data for Parts B and C benefit payments by fiscal year: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/TotalBenefitsPayment

Table 5: Disbursements of income and Medical Benefits Paid by the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund During FY25 by State[7]

States	BLDTF FY25 Disbursements
Kentucky	$46 million
West Virginia	$39.7 million
Virginia	$23.5 million
Pennsylvania	$13 million
Tennessee	$6.6 million
Ohio	$5.7 million
Alabama	$3.5 million
Illinois	$2.7 million
Indiana	$1.8 million
North Carolina	$1.8 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.

APPALACHIAN CITIZENS' Law Center

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This report was prepared January 2026 by the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center and Appalachian Voices. Contact Brendan Muckian-Bates at brendan@aclc.org or Quenton King at quenton@appvoices.org for more information.

7 Source: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/dcmwc/statistics/bls2025/DistributionOfClaimsByState2025