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20 government workers with super-sized pay

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State and local government budgets are by all accounts in dire straits. Last year, collectively, they faced a \$100 billion budget shortfall. After 12 months of belt tightening, emergency aid, layoffs and tax hikes, things are even worse. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said in a report this year that the gap could be \$140 billion. And last week, respected analyst Meredith Whitney suggested that state governments will collapse unless the federal government offers a trillion-dollar bailout that will rival the bank bailout of 2008.

And yet, across America, many government workers are getting rich off taxpayer-funded salaries. City managers get free luxury cars, firefighters get half-million-dollar lump payments and, in California, one city worker is being paid \$500,000 annually during retirement. In New York state, \$100,000 salaries can't be called rich, but at a time when unemployment remains near 10 percent, there are 99,000 state and local workers bringing home six figure salaries.

Two weeks ago we published a survey of government workers with super-sized salaries and invited Red Tape Chronicles readers to do some digging. You weren't shy. **More than 1,000 tips came streaming in via e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and this blog, and we researched each one. Here are the best -- or worst -- examples you sent.**

1. Phoenix – double-dipping top cop



Phoenix.gov

Two frequent causes of outsized government worker pay are so-called “double-dipping” and lump sum retirement payouts due to banked sick time, vacation and other benefits. In the case of Phoenix top cop Jack Harris, we have both. Harris retired from his post as police chief in 2007, receiving a one-time payment of \$562,000 and beginning to draw his annual pension of \$90,000. Two weeks later, the city rehired him as its “public safety manager” – critics say he’s doing exactly the same job -- at a base salary of \$193,000 per year. While it’s common around the country for police officers and other government workers to retire, collect their pension and keep working, the state of Arizona passed a law specifically banning the practice earlier this decade. Conservative think tank Judicial Watch has filed a lawsuit in Maricopa County on behalf of a local resident, alleging the Harris is breaking this law.

“It appears that the senior law enforcement official in the city is gaming the system,” said Judicial Watch’s Christopher Farrell. “That is deeply corrosive to the whole sense of the rule of law.” Farrell said he doesn’t spite Harris his pension, but both the end-run of state law and the high salary – particularly at a time when Phoenix police were threatened with hundreds of layoffs – are egregious, Farrell said. “It’s a gag reflex kind of thing.”

David Leibowitz, spokesman for Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, said that Judicial Watch’s lawsuit is politically motivated and maintained that Harris’ compensation is in line with police chief pay in other major U.S. cities.

“The chief has served the city of Phoenix for many years. He’s incredibly well qualified and his salary and total compensation is well within line with the largest cities in America,” Leibowitz said.

Phoenix is America’s fifth-largest city. The seventh-largest, San Antonio, pays Police Chief William McManus \$183,000. Philadelphia, which is nearly the same size as Phoenix, pays Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey \$195,000, **though his pay will be cut to \$187,500 this year.**

Leibowitz said the method for arriving at Harris’ salary shouldn’t be a consideration.

“You (should) look at the overall money you are spending ... and put it in context of the results you are getting,” he said. “It’s really cost effective. ... We want people in Phoenix to believe they live in the safest large city in America.”

Meanwhile, Phoenix pays a pretty penny to many other uniformed officers. There are 180 police officers and firefighters earning more than \$100,000 annually. And fully 90 percent of the agency’s budget goes to salaries, **according to AZCentral.com.**