

From: [Elizabeth Jones](#)
To: [Janet Wood](#)
Subject: FW: Public Input Form for Agencies Under Review (Public/After Publication)
Date: Wednesday, April 29, 2020 3:42:11 PM

From: sunset@sunset.texas.gov On Behalf Of Texas Sunset Commission
Sent: Wednesday, April 29, 2020 1:11:42 PM (UTC-06:00) Central Time (US & Canada)
To: Sunset Advisory Commission
Subject: Public Input Form for Agencies Under Review (Public/After Publication)

Agency: TEACHER RETIREMENT SYSTEM TEXAS

First Name: Dena

Last Name: Donaldson

Title: Government Relations Specialist and Policy Analyst

Organization you are affiliated with: Texas AFT

Email: ddonaldson@texasaft.org

City: Austin

State: Texas

Your Comments About the Staff Report, Including Recommendations Supported or Opposed:

Texas AFT and its affiliated local unions generally agree with the Sunset Staff Report's assessment of the Texas Teacher Retirement System ("TRS" or "the agency") and overall recommendations for improving the agency's operations and services. We do wish to add a couple of additional improvements we ask the Commission to consider in its final recommendations to the legislature.

The four major issues listed in the Sunset Report reflect much of the feedback Texas AFT has gotten from both active and retired members over several years. Texas AFT most frequently hears concerns about the agency's need to repair its relationship with its members. Members consistently report a lack of trust stemming from poor communication, insufficient information on retirement planning, and a lack of counseling support.

TRS' struggle to provide adequate and comprehensive customer service has been an issue for members for more than a decade. The 2006 Sunset Review of TRS listed it as an issue, and it remains a concern in the current report. Complaints of excessively long wait times for documents and responses to member requests are consistently reported, along with a lack of adequate staffing to answer phones. Texas AFT applauds TRS' goal of answering 80 percent of calls within 3 minutes but hearing that it was only able to manage that for 15 percent of calls in 2018 is troubling for our members who have few alternatives for communicating with the agency. TRS staff are also limited in how they can help members over the phone and the questions they can answer, including questions on their account balance or estimated benefit. The combination of these things often leaves members feeling like they have wasted their time calling the agency for help. Answers to these questions may be found online, but not all members have access to this option and need to be able to access assistance over the phone. Texas AFT suggests better training for staff, a review of policy limiting counselors from providing basic account information over the phone, and increased staffing during high-volume call windows. Changes in these areas would help facilitate clear and timely communications and create a better experience for members utilizing the system and are in alignment with what the staff report recommends.

Often our members report feeling like they are not valued as a client by the agency responsible for their financial

futures. Currently TRS' support for retirement planning is limited and overly complex often leaving members confused and frustrated. This is pointed out in the Sunset Report's survey rating the relevance and user friendliness of the retirement information available, where only 40% of Active members gave the agency favorable ratings. Even though TRS cannot give financial advice to members it can help them better understand their retirement options and needs. This includes making sure members are aware of factors that might impact their individual retirements savings, such as under what circumstances Social Security benefits could be reduced.

Texas AFT strongly recommends the agency focus on ensuring members are educated on their benefits and investment options in a manner that is easy to understand and accessible. Starting with simplifying the overly legalistic TRS benefit explanations found on the website and in written materials so that lay persons may more easily understand the information. As noted in the Sunset report TRS, has produced a series of videos to help members build financial awareness, however this is not the format favored or most easily accessed by many members. Our members have requested more options for receiving information in brochures, through one-on-one counseling, or group presentations. They want direct, meaningful interaction with TRS staff who are managing their retirement investments. Regional representatives who can work with districts and be available to meet with members for counseling is something we recommend TRS look into providing as it would help ease the frustrations reported by both district benefits managers and members who don't live in the Austin area. We fully support the recommendation for TRS to develop a communication and outreach plan to help members and employers more effectively plan for retirement. We encourage TRS to engage members in this process and create opportunities for feedback.

Any Alternative or New Recommendations on This Agency:

Two of the biggest concerns for active and retired members not directly mentioned in the Sunset Staff Report are the rising cost of healthcare and pensions that have not kept up with the cost of living. Active employees pay crippling monthly premiums for health care with limited opportunity to provide input or gain understanding of how plans are decided prior to a decision being made. We are aware of the provider changes for the coming year and are encouraged by some of the plan and rate changes however, premiums still remain high for many members. While the thirteenth check retirees received last session provided some relief, it does not make up for 15 years of stagnant investment in pensions by the state. Were it not for the recent economic downturn, Texas AFT would request the Sunset Commission recommend significant relief for TRS members, specifically an increase in state funding to alleviate the high healthcare costs active members face as well as include a permanent cost of living adjustment for retirees as part of the funding formula. What we request now is that the Sunset Commission urge the Legislature to maintain its investment in TRS, so Texas keeps its promise to its workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Sunset Report for TRS. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need any additional information please

contact: Dena Donaldson, Texas AFT Government Relations Specialist email: ddonaldson@texasaft.org.

My Comment Will Be Made Public: I agree