

9 Improving Health Benefits for our Nation's Coal Miners

The Black Lung Benefits Act provides monthly income and health care benefits to coal miners with black lung disease, an illness caused by the inhalation of coal mine dust. This disease impairs lung function, which can lead to disability and premature death.²⁶ Before the ACA, many deserving miners who applied for black lung benefits were denied benefits due to the high burden of proof. The ACA reinstated a presumption of eligibility of benefits for miners who worked at least 15 years in underground or comparable surface mining, and those who suffer from a totally disabling respiratory impairment. The ACA also granted deceased miners' survivors an automatic entitlement to benefits if the miner was eligible to receive them. As a result of the ACA, a survivor is no longer required to prove that the miner died due to black lung disease.

Named after former Senator Robert Byrd who ardently advocated for coal miners, these provisions – commonly known as the “Byrd Amendments” – removed barriers that coal miners and their families’ had faced in securing benefits by shifting the burden of proof away from the coal miners who worked much of their lives in mining.

Many more miners receive benefits today thanks to Byrd Amendments in the ACA. If the law is repealed, miners’ and survivors’ eligibility for benefits will be slashed. Repealing the ACA will reduce the liability for coal operators and insurers, at the expense of disabled coal miners and their families – jeopardizing the health and financial benefits owed to ill coal miners and their survivors.

“I am 60 years old and I worked in underground coal mines from 1974 to 2001. I ran a scoop, bolted the mine roof, cut coal with a continuous mining machine longwall machine. I was constantly breathing coal mine dust. When I stopped working my breathing was bad. The Black Lung Benefits which I get every month helps me and my wife to pay our bills and it means a lot to us. The “Byrd Amendments” to the Black Lung Benefits Act in the Affordable Care Act made it possible for me to receive benefits. Without the Affordable Care Act, I would have faced a very difficult burden of proving that my disabling lung impairment was caused by coal mine dust exposure and not some other condition. The Affordable Care Act also made it automatic that if I die my wife, Thelma, will continue to receive Black Lung Benefits and will not be required to prove that black lung caused my death. This gives me peace of mind.”

– Danny, Cumberland, KY
Correspondence Sent to the Education and the Workforce
Committee Minority Staff

Repeal jeopardizes the health and financial benefits owed to ill coal miners and their survivors.

26. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Pneumoconiosis*, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/pneumoconioses/>