



NEWS AFFECTING STATE EMPLOYEES

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TSEA doubts accuracy of TDOC commissioner's statements to governor

Jeremy Finley, WSMV

The I-Team continues to receive rosters from sources inside state prisons, including one from Nov. 20 at Lois Deberry Special Needs Facility that showed 16 correctional officers had to work a double shift because of vacancies.

"Do you think what the governor heard today is an accurate reflection of what the correctional officers are seeing?" asked chief investigative reporter Jeremy Finley.

"No sir, I don't. I believe the commissioner used the term 'very good' about turnover. Turnover is still a major issue and we don't believe it's improved, candidly," said Randy Stamps, Government Affairs director with the Tennessee State Employees Association.

Schofield also said in his presentation that a survey went out to correctional officers this week, asking them to rate how they've been impacted by the new 28-day schedule and if they want to change to a new scheduling system.

Schofield said earlier in legislative hearings that individual prisons will determine their own schedules. "We'll compile (the surveys) and see which facilities want to go in which direction," Schofield said.

A TSEA spokesman said the survey should be completed by Dec. 13. Stamps said the TSEA worked with TDOC to develop the survey, and wished that it could have been more detailed and asked more questions about safety. "Because of the assaults, because of the double shifts, a lot of folks don't feel safe in our prisons right now," Stamps said.

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Prisons drop food provider, to change assault definition

Dave Boucher, The Tennessean

The American Correctional Association recommended the department toss its current definitions of assault and "staff/inmate provocations" in favor of definitions that allow for less subjectivity.

Before Thursday, Schofield said the department would review its definitions. But he's never

acknowledged any problems with the current definitions or that the department would make any changes.

"We're going to change those definitions. There will be changes, but we'll talk about those soon," Schofield said.

The changes Schofield said are underway will likely have an impact on the department: After repeatedly saying violent incidents have dropped 45 percent since 2011, a more accurate definition of assaults will certainly change that data.

There's also the possibility the department will review previous incident reports to see if they were characterized inaccurately. Any changes to that information would change understandings of safety in the state's prisons.

The Tennessee State Employee Association applauded Schofield's request for raises, but it refuted a statement Schofield made during the hearing about violence being down in the prison system.

"The term 'violent incident' is not found in any policy or procedure guideline of TDOC, so we do not know how the numbers of 'violent incidents' were determined," said TSEA President Bryan Merritt in a prepared statement.

"This confusion is part of the reason the September ACA review recommended changes be made to the department's 'Definitions of Disciplinary Offenses.' "

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State Correction Department officials asking state to fund 5 percent raise for prison guards at new Trousdale County-owned prison

Andy Sher, Chattanooga Times-Free Press

State Correction Department officials are asking Gov. Bill Haslam for \$8.3 million in new funding to give a 5 percent raise to prison guards and probation officers in hopes of slowing widespread departures.

Commissioner Derrick Schofield told Haslam at a budget hearing Thursday "if we were funded for this, this would push us up to about No. 3 with the surrounding states."

The department has been hemorrhaging correctional officers across the state, especially at the West Tennessee State Penitentiary in Henning, Tenn., and Bledsoe County Regional Correctional Complex in Pikeville.

Guards have complained about low pay and plummeting morale stemming from changes in work schedules and the reclassification of certain inmate-on-guard assaults. Correctional officers complain the change made their work more dangerous.

...Randy Stamps, with the Tennessee State Employees Association, which has been critical of Schofield's policies, said he was "astounded that he believes that turnover is going very well, 'good' - I think was the word that he used. We still have a huge turnover problem."

Schofield also is asking for \$26.1 million more in recurring funding and \$39.2 million in one-time funds, including \$20 million to build a new headquarters and a new service and training academy.

He outlined 3.5 percent in cuts or other savings to recurring spending totaling \$5.12 million.

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State moving on privatizing parts of 11 parks

Richard Locker, Knoxville News Sentinel

Next Friday, the state will open bids from private contractors bidding to take over the "hospitality" functions of 11 of the largest Tennessee state parks. To sweeten the pot for would-be vendors, the Department of Environment and Conservation wants to give them \$55 million to make the improvements that the agency estimates is needed at those facilities.

At its annual budget hearing Thursday, the department's top officials asked Gov. Bill Haslam to include the \$55 million in the state budget he will propose to state legislators by early February. The agency is also asking for another \$15 million toward the remaining \$65 million in deferred maintenance at the 43 other state parks and the parts of the 11 parks not included in the outsourcing plan.

That plan includes what the department calls the hospitality functions - inns, conference centers, cabins, restaurants, golf courses, marinas and gift shops - at Cumberland Mountain, David Crockett, Fall Creek Falls, Harrison Bay, Henry Horton, Montgomery Bell, Natchez Trace, Paris Landing, Pickwick Landing, Tims Ford and Warrior's Path state parks.

The \$55 million is considered crucial enough to any outsourcing deal for the parks that procurement documents on the state's website say the plan would likely be scrapped if the Legislature doesn't approve the allocation. In the question-and-answer phase of the bid process, at least one potential contractor indicated it might be reluctant to bid without the certainty that the taxpayer funding will be approved.

...After next week's bid opening, the department's timeline calls for months of review and possible negotiations with contractors before contracts are to be signed next July 15.

The parks outsourcing plan is a separate project from a larger proposal by the Haslam administration to privatize the management and operations of virtually all other state-owned real estate, including college campuses, prisons, hospitals, office buildings and the other state parks.

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Haslam intends to rebid exclusive state-office leasing contract now held by Jones Lang LaSalle

Andy Sher, Chattanooga Times-Free Press

Tennessee officials have decided not to extend real estate giant Jones Lang LaSalle's exclusive and controversial contract for negotiating leased office space deals on behalf of state agencies.

The state had the option to extend JLL's three-year contract, which expires Feb. 29, for another year.

But according to General Services Department spokesman David Roberson, officials "decided that the evolving nature of leasing needs makes a new contract more attractive." JLL is eligible to respond to the new request and to any ensuing procurement, he said.

Chicago-based JLL won the initial consulting contract with the state in 2012. It assessed some three dozen government-owned buildings and recommended closing a number of buildings.

When the company's contract was expanded by amendment to include procuring outside leases, which were previously handled by state workers, critics cried foul while Gov. Bill Haslam and top officials said it was far more effective and efficient.

The new request for information asks for responses from prospective vendors "that could handle

leasing negotiations in various regions of the state," Roberson said. "This would allow us to enter into contracts with multiple vendors, rather than choose one vendor for lease negotiations throughout the state."

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Haslam seeks to manage others' budget hopes amid rebounding state revenue

Andy Sher, Chattanooga Times-Free Press

Republican Gov. Bill Haslam opens public hearings today on his administration's upcoming budget, though Tennessee's rebounding revenues have administration officials seeking to dampen state lawmakers' expectations.

A major part of the annual revenue game was resolved last week when the State Funding Board lowballed projected revenue growth for the last half of this fiscal year as well as in the FY 2017 spending plan that will come before the General Assembly early next year. The board ignored more optimistic projections by University of Tennessee economist Bill Fox and economists in Haslam's Department of Revenue and the Legislature's Fiscal Review Committee.

...Haslam is expected to be on the defensive on at least two major budget fronts during the 2016 legislative session.

The first is transportation funding, where he is trying to make the case that Tennessee needs to raise fuel taxes for road building and maintenance. Highway money comes from gas and diesel taxes, not the general fund, and has been basically flat for several years.

Some lawmakers are demanding the state repay \$280 million taken from transportation by two prior governors.

The second is pressure on the state's Hall income tax of 6 percent on interest and dividends.

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Fitzhugh: No more cuts to TN's 'super lean' budget

News Release, Tennessee House Democratic Caucus

House Minority Leader Craig Fitzhugh (D-Ripley) pushed back today on Governor Bill Haslam's (R) call for more across the board cuts to essential state services. This comes as the administration begins five-days of budget hearings in Nashville.

"Tennessee budgets are already super lean," said Leader Fitzhugh who previously served as Chairman of the Finance, Ways & Means Committee from 2005-2011 under both Democratic and Republican majorities. "We have cut through the fat, into the muscle and I fear are headed for bone with more arbitrary cuts."

With current state revenue collection exceeding estimates by almost \$300 million, Governor Haslam has directed his commissioners to prepare budgets for FY 16-17 that reflect a 3.5 percent reduction in funding. This cut would be in addition to the 7 percent reduction to state services requested by Governor Haslam in 2014.

"The Department of Corrections has faced a shortfall of nearly \$100 million. Many teachers never saw the 4 percent raise they were promised. Our roads and bridges have a backlog of maintenance projects, while last year's budget raised property taxes on disabled veterans by 20 percent. More arbitrary cuts are cruel and simply do not make good budgeting sense."

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Troubled DHS proposes \$3 million in cuts

Anita Wadhvani, The Tennessean

Department of Human Services chief Raquel Hatter also proposed eliminating staff in a division that oversees fraud, abuse and waste and ensures department accountability - at a time when lawmakers, the Tennessee comptroller's office and investigations by The Tennessean have raised questions about the agency's oversight abilities after revealing millions of dollars in questionable DHS payments to subcontractors.

A Tennessean investigation earlier this month found that in Davidson County alone, 19 child care centers under the oversight of DHS received nearly \$10 million in subsidies for low-income children over a four-year period despite numerous health and safety violations.

A July Tennessean investigation found that DHS approved six-figure bonuses and payments for home improvements for one rural West Tennessee agency participating in a separate DHS food program for poor children. Auditors with the comptroller's office discovered that other state contractors who participated in the state's \$80 million child food program billed double for the meals they were authorized to provide, mysteriously lost paperwork when auditors arrived to inspect them and failed to ensure qualified children received meals. In total, auditors questioned \$1.8 million in payments last year in a small sample of agencies reviewed. In 2013, auditors questioned \$4.3 million in payments. DHS has noted that some of those questioned payments were the result of faulty paperwork and not because children went without food.

The food program's director resigned after The Tennessean investigation, telling the newspaper that many of the problems were a direct result of not having enough staff.

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Spike in abuse cases prompts DCS to ask for more investigators

Anita Wadhvani, The Tennessean

The agency is on track to handle 70,000 cases this year, an increase of more than 10,000 from 59,180 cases investigated in 2012. The reasons for the spike in reports of children in danger vary, DCS chief Bonnie Hommrich told Haslam at a Tuesday budget hearing. Substance abuse is a key driver, and the agency is seeing increasing numbers of children with disabilities whose families are struggling to care for them. The department also has encouraged more reporting of suspected abuse.

But a single case can include multiple children in one family, and numerous allegations of abuse or neglect for each child, stretching thin the resources of 1,000 child protective services workers already on staff.

Adding more caseworkers would require Haslam and the legislature to approve \$1.3 million in state budget increases for the agency, although the total \$3.6 million price tag for the new staff would be supplemented by the federal government and other sources.

The agency also is requesting additional funds to increase payments to foster families, steer more resources toward adoptive parents, increase rates for agencies subcontracted to care for foster kids and add another programmer to maintain DCS' computer system, whose failures in the past have been subject to a court order to fix. Those failures have included not paying foster families and being unable to accurately track the number of children who have died while under the supervision of DCS.

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Haslam unveils major higher-education restructuring proposal

Staff, Knoxville News Sentinel

Gov. Bill Haslam unveiled a major restructuring of the state's public higher education system Tuesday, including a plan leading to separate governing boards for the University of Memphis and other four-year universities in the Tennessee Board of Regents system.

Memphis supporters have lobbied and pushed for an independent board for decades.

The governor had scheduled an 11 a.m. news conference at the state Capitol to make what his office called "a significance announcement about" his "Drive to 55" initiative - his goal for 55 percent of Tennessee adults to have some form of post-high school credential by 2025. Currently, 32 percent of adult Tennesseans have a college degree or vocational program certificate.

Haslam is expected to establish a transitional committee that would work out details of the restructuring and a timetable. The largest Board of Regents universities - Memphis and Middle Tennessee State University - will get their own governing boards first, with benchmarks established for the other four - Austin Peay State University, East Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University and Tennessee Tech University - to eventually follow.

The state's 13 community colleges - including Pellissippi State in Knoxville and Southwest Tennessee in Memphis - and 27 colleges of applied technology are also governed by the Board of Regents.

It is unclear yet if the restructuring would affect the separate University of Tennessee system.

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