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Texas Department of Criminal Justice



Executive director's legislative update

By Bryan Collier

The House and Senate versions of the general appropriations bill have been filed, and a brief summary of the proposed funding for TDCJ is available on the agency website. The bills as filed provide a good starting point for further discussion with the Senate Finance and House Appropriations committees regarding the agency's budget for the next two fiscal years.

When state policymakers asked agencies to submit an initial budget proposal for the fiscal years 2018-19 biennium showing the impact of a 4 percent budget reduction, the TDCJ included several cost savings proposals, along with a request to retain the balance of the funds. The 4 percent across-the-board reduction is not included in either bill, although the Senate version does include a 1.5 percent reduction. The agency will continue to seek funding for a number of "exceptional items" included in our Legislative Appropriations Request, to include the renovation and repair of aging facilities, and seek

to maintain funds that would be impacted by an across-the-board reduction.

As of mid-February there hasn't been much discussion regarding the closure of another correctional facility, but I anticipate this subject will soon receive serious consideration, and the closure of at least one if not more units is likely. Our efforts to assist staff displaced during previous unit closures have been very successful, and similar efforts will be made in the event another facility is closed.

Several thousand bills have been filed to date, and several thousand more will be filed before the deadline. There has been no legislation proposed that would impact employee benefits such as health insurance and the pension program. However, there has been some conversation regarding the need for additional cost-containment strategies to address the rising cost of health care for employees and those served by various

programs such as Medicaid, and similar dialogue regarding cost-containment strategies for retirement benefits; we will continue to monitor these discussions. Senate Bill 485/ House Bill 1421 would transfer ombudsman staff and some grievance staff to the Commission on Jail Standards, but otherwise no legislation has been filed that would significantly impact TDCJ employees.

It's still very early in the legislative process, so no decisions have been made regarding any appropriation or policy issue. We will use the agency website to keep you advised of any developments regarding the agency's budget or issues impacting employee salaries and benefits.

Governor Greg Abbott recently ordered a state agency hiring freeze which provides a few exceptions for certain TDCJ positions, to include uniformed security staff and their ranking officers, agricultural and industrial specialists, parole officers and OIG investiga-

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tors. It is possible other positions might be exempted in the future. To the extent a hiring freeze makes anyone's work more challenging, your contributions are appreciated even more. Every one of you helps this agency accomplish its vital public safety mission.

Thank you again for your efforts on behalf of all Texans. It is my honor serve as your executive director. ●

As this issue of Connections was being finalized, legislators preparing the state's budget for the FY 2018-19 biennium were considering closure of four TDCJ correctional facilities: the Ware Unit in Colorado City, the Bartlett State Jail, the Bridgeport Pre-Parole Transfer Facility and the West Texas Intermediate Sanction Facility in Brownfield. The Ware Unit is a state-operated facility located in close proximity to the Wallace Unit, also in Colorado City; the other three units are operated by private vendors.