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Message from the executive director: legislative update

By Bryan Collier

On November 14, 2016, legislators began pre-filing bills for the upcoming legislative session which begins on January 10, 2017. More than 500 bills were filed on the first day, but since then the pace of bill filing has slowed considerably. None of the legislation pre-filed to date would have a substantial impact on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) or the agency's employees. As expected, neither the house nor senate version of the fiscal years 2018-19 general appropriations bill were included among the early submissions. Although the proposed state budget probably won't be available until January 2017, we have already been meeting with various legislative offices regarding future funding.

Also during November, the House Pensions Committee met to discuss unfunded liabilities for the Law Enforcement and Custodial Officer Supplemental Retirement Fund (LE-COS). Porter Wilson, Executive Director of the Employees Retirement System of Texas

(ERS) said neither the LECOS fund nor the regular ERS retirement fund were funded at an actuarially sound level, but reported the status of both funds had substantially improved because of actions taken by the 84th Texas Legislature.

Looking ahead, it is impossible to anticipate every legislative issue affecting TDCJ employees that may arise during the next five months, but I want to address one item which could affect part of our workforce. Given recent declines in the offender population and projections indicating the population will remain relatively stable in the future, the 85th Texas Legislature may consider closing one or more correctional facilities. Should the state close a unit it would by no means be the first time; in 2011, the Central unit in Fort Bend County was closed, and in 2013 operations were terminated at both the Dawson State Jail in Dallas and the Mineral Wells Pre-Parole Transfer Facility.

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 a proposal to close the South Texas Intermediate Sanction Facility (ISF) located in downtown Houston. The privately operated facility houses up to 450 parole violators who, under this proposal, would be relocated to the Kegans State Jail, also located in downtown Houston. The mission of the Kegans Unit would change from a state jail to an ISF.

While the South Texas ISF is privately operated, decisions regarding the closure of correctional facilities could also affect state-operated institutions. Many factors could be considered when considering specific units for closure, to include mission, operational cost, infrastructure, staffing and location. This agency will recommend policymakers be conservative when planning for future capacity needs because sufficient correctional

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capacity for offender population is critical for both staff and offender safety, and TDCJ will once again strive to minimize the impact on agency employees should a facility be closed. For example, the TDCJ will facilitate transfers to nearby units with vacant positions and, when possible to do so without compromising safety and security, delay filling positions at nearby units in order to accommodate transferring staff. Similar efforts to assist displaced staff during previous unit closures were very successful.

Although a decision regarding closure of the South Texas ISF has already been made, decisions regarding any other unit closures would likely be finalized in mid to late May. As in previous legislative sessions, we will continue to use the TDCJ website and the online *Connections* newsletter to keep employees informed regarding appropriation and policy decisions affecting the agency's workforce.

From the personal experiences I've had with the state's elected officials over the years, I can assure you they deeply appreciate your contributions to public safety. During the upcoming legislative session I look forward to working with them again on a wide range of criminal justice and employee issues.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of all Texans. It is my honor serve as your executive director and to represent TDCJ and its many dedicated public servants. ●