

State employees leave system

Texas turnover rate above national average

EL PASO (AP) — Weldon Jarratt has road building in his blood, and he is warning Texas drivers to expect a bumpy ride ahead.

Jarratt, a former Texas Department of Transportation employee, is one of a growing number of people who have left state employment for higher wages and the promise of upward mobility in the private sector.

"To be promoted any further, somebody had to die or retire," Jarratt said of his former job.

Raises were not a sure thing, either. "It was strictly up to whether the Legislature gave us any raises," he said, "and the Legislature has not been too favorable to the state in the past 15 years."

State employees repair roads, guard prison inmates, administer welfare and maintain computer systems. They oversee agricultural programs, fight wildfires and patrol the state's highways.

And in 1999, 17.6 percent of them — 25,421 people — left the system.

That is slightly higher than the 1998 rate of 17.4 percent and above the national average of 14.9 percent.

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— Mike Jones
spokesman for George W. Bush

The result is that lost productivity and constant training are costing the state between \$127 million and \$254 million each year, according to a March report from the state auditor's office.

Advocates for state employees attribute the accelerating turnover

mainly to a gap in pay between state and private sector employees who do similar jobs and a lack of upward mobility.

In 1998, the average Texas worker in the private sector earned \$32,090 a year, compared with \$28,653 for the average state government worker, according to a May study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nationwide, government workers made \$32,931, according to the study.

Mike Jones, a spokesman for Gov. George W. Bush, said state employees received \$100-a-month raises in both 1998 and 2000. Additional pay raises were given to child welfare workers, key computer staff and prison guards, he said.

"Gov. Bush values the work of state employees, and his staff is concerned about our turnover rate," Jones said. "If the governor is in office next year, he will look forward to working with legislative leaders on ideas to retain our best public servants."

News in Brief

Two burned bodies identified

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Two of the bodies found burning last weekend in South Texas have been identified.

The bodies of Sean Michael Cain, 32, and Nelley Esmerelda Bravo, 23, were found wrapped in carpet and burning along a remote stretch of road in Frio County. The third victim has not yet been identified.

Police arrested and charged three men in the slayings. Miguel Paredes, 18, John Anthony Saenz, 28, and Greg Alvarado, 21, were arrested this week. All three were charged with capital murder.

All three men were being held Saturday in the Bexar County Jail, according to the San Antonio Express News.

The bodies were found late Sunday by a farmer investigating a grass fire near his home. Authorities still have not identified one of the bodies or the manner in which the men died.

Cool-acting bird helps launch youth message

AUSTIN (AP) — Hip-hop music plays and a smooth-talking animated duck dices a stressed out smoker.

"Tobacco is foul," says the rebellious duck, definitely a bird with an attitude.

It's the centerpiece of the state's new youth anti-smoking ad campaign — the first to be paid for with some of Texas' \$17.3 billion tobacco settlement money — that gets going Monday.

Teen-agers from across the state who were recruited to help create the \$2 million anti-smoking ad campaign selected the duck mascot.

The advertising and public relations effort is part of a pilot project targeting parts of East Texas and overseen by the Texas Department of Health. The initiative is aimed mostly at young people between ages 11 and 18, with a particular emphasis on sixth- through eighth-graders.

Hence, the hip-talking duck. "It will be hard-hitting, realistic, timely and speak to kids in a language they can relate to," said Dr. Phil Huang, chief of the health department's bureau of disease, injury and tobacco prevention.

Statewide research has shown that sixth-graders are at the highest risk of starting to use tobacco, Huang said.

The anti-tobacco campaign is intended to have a special focus on Hispanic, African-American and Asian-American youths.

Speaking in English and Spanish, the duck will be featured in television, radio and billboard ads in four media markets: Houston-Galveston, Beaumont-Port Arthur, Tyler-Longview and Bryan-College Station.

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