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# POWs get medical leave

By Chris Roberts  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORT BLISS, Texas — Five former prisoners of war from Fort Bliss are in good enough health to be released to their units so they can begin a 30-day leave, the commander of the William Beaumont Army Medical Center said Wednesday.

"They are in excellent spirits this afternoon," said Col. Glenn W. Mitchell, medical center commander. "They have had enough of our poking and prodding and they will be very happy to be returned to their units today to start a convalescent leave that will begin within the next couple of days."

The soldiers must complete some paperwork and have it signed by their commander, which could be done in as little time as a few hours, said post spokeswoman Jean Offutt.

Mitchell said the soldiers, members of the 507th Maintenance Company who were captured on March 23 near Nasiriyah, Iraq, have shown no signs of picking up any diseases. He said they will be monitored for their physical and psy-

chological health in the coming months.

He said Spc. Shoshana Johnson, who was shot in both ankles, is healing well.

"Shoshana is doing extraordinarily well and she has been placed in two walking casts and given crutches," Mitchell said, adding that all the soldiers are expected to make complete recoveries.

He declined to discuss the specific injuries of any other of the former POWs.

In addition to Johnson, the 507th soldiers taken prisoner were: Spc. Joseph Hudson, 23, Alamogordo, N.M.; Spc. Edgar Hernandez, 21, Mission; Pfc. Patrick Miller, 23, Park City, Kan.; and Sgt. James J. Riley, 31, Pennsauken, N.J.

Arrangements have been made with hospitals, military and civilian, in their hometown areas to provide any needed care, and when they return to Fort Bliss after their leave they will have to check in at the medical center, he said.

"I would hope that as they begin this period of decompression and intensive reintegration back into their lives and their families," Mitchell said, "that we could leave them as much privacy as possible to be able to use this brief time that they have before we expect them to get back to work."

# A&M declines to disclose budget

COLLEGE STATION, Texas (AP) — Texas A&M University officials are asking the attorney general for a ruling on whether budget plans sought by the Bryan-College Station Eagle under the Texas Public Information Act are public record.

The newspaper requested copies of the budget plans, which outline how individual colleges would slice spending to absorb looming cuts in state funding, earlier this month. The University told the newspaper Tuesday in a faxed letter that it would ask an attorney general's ruling.

The A&M University System legal office contends the budget plans may be kept private because they are internal memos protected by privilege. The documents are believed to indicate where A&M may be spending to balance its budget.

Deputy General Counsel Scott Kelly at the A&M System said the documents include advice, recommendations and opinions related to upcoming policy decisions.

He said Tuesday that the law exempts such documents from disclosure under the concept of executive privilege.

# Virtual charter school bill defeated in House approved in Senate

By Natalie Gott  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — The Texas Senate on Wednesday approved a bill that would allow universities and colleges to operate "virtual charter schools" using taxpayer money to educate kindergarten through high school students at home.

The approval on 27-3 vote came shortly after the Texas House of Representatives rejected a similar bill.

Under the Senate bill by Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, the schools, chartered through a public university or college, would receive an average \$4,700 per student per year of taxpayer money. The money, which is equal to the funding for public school students, would pay for students to get a computer, printer and instructional materials.

The schools would provide state-mandated curriculum and student performance would be assessed regularly.

Under the Senate bill, only 2,000 students could participate in the program and only two universities would be allowed to set up such a program. If the program is successful, the program may expand later, Shapiro said.

"Education in my opinion should not be a one size fits all in our society," said Shapiro, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee.

"Virtual schools are the coming craze," she said.

The House, apparently, did not agree.

The 150-member chamber voted 79-63 to table the bill, meaning it cannot be brought back for reconsideration. The House bill was much broader and did not cap the number of students or charters.

Shapiro said she would work with House members to try to get her bill approved there.

After the House vote, Rep. Kent Grusendorf, a Republican from Arlington who sponsored the bill, would say only that he would wait to see what happened to the Senate legislation.

"The Internet has drastically

affected our lives," Grusendorf said early while presenting legislation. "It's an approach where the focus will be on the individual needs of the individual students. The focus will be on learning rather than on teachers."

Shapiro and Grusendorf, chairman of the House Public Education Committee, said they believed the schools would give children more flexibility in study at their own pace. For example, a gifted high school freshman who is able to do senior-level math would be able to do so, Grusendorf has said.

But some representative opposed the bill, saying cost-strapped Texas could not afford it.

"No matter whether you think it's good or bad, it's the right time at this time to pull funds from our public schools

order to fund the bill," said Rep. Sylvester Turner, D-Houston. "We do not have the money."

Teachers groups that criticized Grusendorf's measure as a "stealth voucher" program would take money away from public schools applauded the House.

"With Texas likely not able to purchase new textbooks for public school students, using taxpayer funds to pay for computers for home-school students doesn't make much sense. There are better, more cost-effective ways to make online learning available that will benefit all of our state students," said Larry Combs, spokesman for the Association of Texas Professional Educators.

John Cole, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers, said that if the Senate bill "makes it to the House floor the same argument that the House version should stop the Senate version."

The three senators who voted against the bill were Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin; Mario Gallegos, D-Houston; and Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo.

Under the Senate bill, lawmakers would have to vote to continue the virtual charter school program past 2009.



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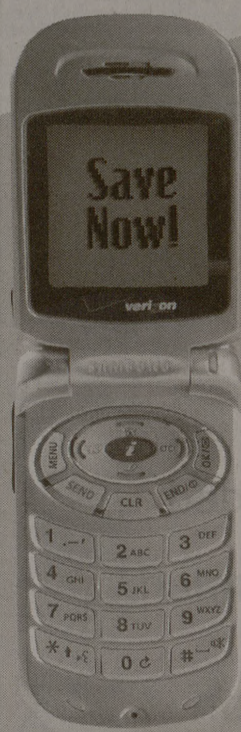
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