

# State agencies offer up 9,800 jobs to close budget shortfall

*Though many positions will be exempt, cuts could be deep because of recession.*

By **Kate Alexander**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Updated: 10:54 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 18, 2010

Published: 9:53 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 18, 2010

To the children at the Texas School for the Deaf, Mary Monckton is a sunny and engaging speech pathologist determined to help them learn to communicate.

But to legislators, Monckton is an expense that Texas might not be able to afford.

Hers is one of 9,800 jobs that state agencies have offered up for elimination as legislators prepare to trim billions of dollars from the 2012-13 state budget, according to an American-Statesman analysis of agency budget requests. Some of those positions are empty, and others will probably be preserved by legislators.

Still, the budget data show that most of those jobs are not vacant, but are filled by living, breathing workers who could be laid off as the state grapples with a projected two-year budget shortfall approaching \$21 billion .

Mike Gross , vice president of the Texas State Employees Union , said he expects there will be much more pressure to lay off employees next year than in 2003, the last time Texas faced a similar budget crunch. State leaders have again vowed to close the gap without raising taxes, but the magnitude of the budget problem is greater this time, in part because of the ongoing recession.

"We plan to defeat (layoff plans), but we're going to have a lot more headwind," Gross said. "Texas is not a poor state. We can afford to do better by our people."

Although jobs and the economy have been a major focus of the election season, there has been little if any discussion about the potential loss of thousands of state jobs next year.

Agencies have a tendency to offer worst-case scenarios to open the budget negotiations, said Talmadge Heflin , director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a think tank that promotes limited government.

"If they show the legislators all these bad things will happen, maybe it will soften their hearts a little bit or loosen their pocketbooks," said Heflin, a former legislator who was chairman of the House Appropriations Committee in 2003.

Despite the posturing, Heflin said, "there is a bit of truth to what they're presenting."

For Claire Bugen , superintendent of the School for the Deaf, it is agonizing to consider losing Monckton or one of the school's five other speech pathologists along with an audiologist, a librarian, a high school teacher and many other employees.

"Did you see the tears on my page?" Bugen said when asked about her school's \$51.5 million budget request.

Bugen, as with other state agency leaders, was required to propose cuts totaling 10 percent of the school's general revenue budget, which came to \$3.6 million .

She first nixed a summer school program that serves 250 deaf children from mainstream schools, as well as building repair, some laundry services for residential students, computers, furniture and more. Still \$1.2 million short of the reduction target, the only thing left to cut was people.

"Every little position you lose in a school like ours has an impact," said Bugen, who says the School for the Deaf should be exempt from the cuts, as are traditional school districts.

"We're so small. How is our \$3,637,402 going to help? It's not going to help the State of Texas balance its budget, but it would do so much for us."

Therein lies the problem for Texas legislators.

What's really on table?

The state's \$87 billion general revenue fund pays for a handful of behemoths — public education, health and human services, criminal justice — and a bunch of relatively small agencies.

For now, state leaders have protected public school aid from the cuts, though people from across the political spectrum say it is unlikely that schools will be left untouched.

"If the Legislature is going to balance this budget primarily through budget cuts, nothing can be off the table," said Dale Craymer , president of the Texas Taxpayers and Research Association and onetime budget director for former Gov. Ann Richards.

Lawmakers also have less flexibility to reduce Medicaid-related and Children's Health Insurance Program costs, as they did in 2003, because federal health care reform prohibits changing benefits or eligibility requirements.

The result is a concentrated blow to the programs that are left.

All told, the 10 percent cuts could reduce state spending by \$3 billion if fully implemented, according to the Legislative Budget Board.

Another \$1.2 billion could be saved if the 5 percent cuts enacted in the current budget are continued.

That leaves a long way to go to close a \$21 billion gap, even with an \$8 billion rainy day fund.

In the end, certain agencies might be told to dig even deeper.

Still, not all of the 9,800 jobs that agencies have placed on the chopping block are equally vulnerable.

Moves to save jobs afoot

Key legislators are already pushing to exempt from layoffs 7,300 prison guards, parole officers and other corrections workers at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Every job preserved means fewer dollars saved. Dreading a "soft-on-crime" label, however, lawmakers often allow politics to trump budget reality.

On the flip side, colleges and universities are expected to add to the final job loss tally when the budget is completed next year. The schools were not included in the American-Statesman analysis because they were not required to report the full impact of the potential cuts in their budget proposals.

But higher education shouldered a disproportionately large amount of the \$1.2 billion trim from the current budget, and that is not expected to change next year.

The University of Texas, for instance, has said 600 jobs could be eliminated if a full 10 percent cut is required. At Texas A&M University, the number of affected jobs would be 400.

In 2003, most of the 10,000 eliminated jobs were cleared through attrition and a retirement incentive. About 1,400 workers were laid off at the Department of Criminal Justice and the Texas Education Agency .

But 2011 might necessitate more actual layoffs because the budget situation is worse and the state has fewer budget-cutting options than in 2003, Craymer said.

Because of the recession, there are also fewer vacant positions to scuttle without affecting a person, said Andy Homer , government relations director for the Texas Public Employees Association.

"The turnover numbers have just gone down. People who have a job are sticking with it," Homer said.

Layoffs account for about 70 percent of the 2,300 job cuts offered by non-public safety agencies, according to the budget requests.

Almost all of the public safety job cuts, if they were to happen, would be layoffs.

Effects of cuts outlined

Agencies say Texans could pay a steep price for eliminating these jobs. For example:

- Courts of Appeal in Austin, Houston, San Antonio and elsewhere say they would have no choice but to downsize by 46 employees, with some lopping off their legal staff by 20 percent or more . The result of saving \$6 million through the cuts would be greater backlogs of civil and criminal cases and fewer cleared cases, the courts wrote.
- The Texas Veterans Commission would lose 21 jobs , including three employees who help the families of wounded veterans find jobs. Thirteen of the eliminated positions — nine of which are now occupied — would be claims counselors who help veterans apply for medical and pension benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

A veteran's chances of maximizing his or her federal benefits go up considerably when aided by the counselors, who can navigate the VA's labyrinthine bureaucracy and speak its distinct language, said Victor Polanco , a veterans counselor at the VA clinic on Montopolis Drive. "It can be cumbersome," he said.

Eliminating all 13 claims counselor positions would have the effect of reducing federal benefits to Texas veterans and their families by \$88 million over the two years, and the state would lose \$3 million in sales tax as a result, the agency estimates.

Services could suffer

At the School for the Deaf, Bugen is concerned that the staffing reductions could leave the state in a legally tenuous spot because each of the school's 552 students is entitled to federally mandated services for students with disabilities.

"There is indeed a chance that one of the unintended consequences of these reductions could be an increase in litigation regarding the denial of or lack of appropriate educational services resulting in larger costs to the state budget," Bugen wrote in the agency's budget request.

Monckton, who has worked as a speech pathologist at the school for three years, said she loves her job but could find another if she were laid off.

She is concerned, however, that the staff reductions could affect the individual instruction provided to the students, particularly the littlest ones who are at a critical period in terms of learning American Sign Language and getting exposure to spoken English.

The school has never been in a position where it has had to turn down a student. But the budget crunch has forced the school to ponder changes that were once unthinkable, such as limiting the ages of the students it serves or creating a waiting list.

"It's something I'm hoping we never have to face," Bugen said.

#### **Proposed state job cuts\***

More than 9,800 state jobs could be eliminated next year as Texas prepares for a potential shortfall of \$21 billion for the 2012-13 budget. Here is a look at agencies that have put the most jobs on the chopping block.

#### **Agency Jobs cut**

Dept. of Criminal Justice 7,353

Youth Commission 460

Comptroller

of Public Accounts 315

Dept. of State Health

Services 276

Health and Human

Services Commission 246

Department of Insurance 186

Agrilife Extension Service 140

Department of Public Safety 120

Agrilife Research 116

Alcoholic Beverage

Commission 94

\* Includes both layoffs and the elimination of vacant positions.

Source: 2012-13 Legislative Appropriations Requests submitted to the Legislative Budget Board

kalexander@statesman.com; 445-3618

Find this article at:

[Print this page](#) [Close](#)

<http://www.statesman.com/news/texas-politics/state-agencies-offer-up-9-800-jobs-to-924533.html>

