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## Agency News

# Legislative update for TDCJ employees from the executive director

By Brad Livingston

The 84th Legislature concluded its recent session on June 1, and I am pleased to report that policymakers took decisive action to address issues of great importance to the TDCJ and our employees. There are summaries of these actions on the TDCJ website, however, there are a few critical decisions I want to highlight.

Normally I would begin any discussion of a recently concluded legislative session by discussing the appropriations specifically earmarked for TDCJ and the men and women working for the agency, but the action taken by the Legislature to secure the long-term fiscal viability of the pension program serving all state employees must be recognized as an outstanding achievement meriting our deepest appreciation.

Prior to the legislative session, representatives of the Employees Retirement System told the Legislature that action was needed to ensure the long-term stability of the employee pension program, and emphasized that any delay would make potential solu-

tions more costly for both the state and employees. The least costly option for the Legislature, at least in the short term, would have been to change employee retirement benefits in a way that would have negatively impacted both current and future employees.

The virtually unanimous decision of the Legislature was to reject options that would harm employees and to instead appropriate the funding necessary to make the pension program actuarially sound. I cannot overstate the significance of this action for all state employees, and I want to personally thank Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Speaker Straus, Representatives Otto, Turner, Flynn and Murphy, Senators Nelson, Huffman and Whitmire, and all the members of the Texas Legislature for their support.

Employee pay raises are another issue where the Legislature took decisive and positive action. All state employees received a 2.5 percent salary increase to offset the additional employee contributions necessary to ade-



quately fund the pension program. I regret most state employees will not see an increase in their take home pay despite the salary increase, but maintaining retirement benefits was the highest priority. However, many TDCJ employees, specifically correctional officers, correctional laundry and food service managers, ranking correctional officers, and parole officers, will receive an additional 8 percent pay raise effective September 1, 2015. The pay raise will benefit not only the men and women serving in these positions but will also enhance agency operations by helping our recruitment efforts and assisting in the retention of experienced employees. Once again, I thank the state's policy makers for their decisions benefitting all state employees and those benefitting TDCJ employees in particular.

In addition, the Legislature appropriated an additional \$600 million to the employee group health insurance program in order to

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

maintain the state's share of employee and retiree health care costs.

I also want to highlight the operational funding provided to TDCJ. Funding to maintain current operations, appropriations for badly needed renovations at aging facilities and to continue adding comprehensive video surveillance systems to more units, addressing the increasing cost of offender health care, expanding treatment and diversion pro-

grams in probation and parole, as well as additional reentry funding are all critical to accomplishing the mission of the agency and cannot be taken for granted.

I do not want to diminish the importance of other policy decisions made by the Legislature. A summary of certain criminal justice related legislation is also provided on the TDCJ website.

I hope all TDCJ employees will join with me in thanking the governor, the legislative leadership and your local state representative and senator for their efforts during the 84th regular session and for making the legislative session a tremendous success for employees as well as the agency. ●