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The State: The mystery man on Haley's staff

By: John O'Connor

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Gov. Nikki Haley has added a government-efficiency specialist to her staff, one who comes with a low price tag and an even lower profile.

Christian Soura is the former secretary of the Department of Administration under Pennsylvania's Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell. Soura, the man Haley has dubbed "Mr. Fix-It," said his mission is to find ways to reduce state government costs, inefficiency and bureaucracy.

Soura, 32, agreed to be paid \$1 a year after he and his wife decided they wanted to move South. After selling their Harrisburg home, the couple is living on his Pennsylvania pension, Soura said.

That \$1-a-year salary sets Soura apart from other Haley staffers, some of whom are paid far more than staffers were paid under former Gov. Mark Sanford.

Haley asked Soura to "see where you can save money and make life better for the general public," he said.

For example, the S.C. House of Representatives on Wednesday approved a bill — for the fourth time — creating a Cabinet-level Department of Administration to manage day-to-day state government operations. Soura said a central administrative office is critical to streamlining expenses for information technology, personnel and other overhead.

"You free up agencies to do the work they were supposed to do," Soura said. "It's one of the ways you can save money and eliminate duplication."

Soura has been something of a mystery man in the Haley administration, with legislative and agency staffers wondering who that man was sitting in on meetings.

Haley introduced Soura at a January press conference as her point person for developing a Department of Administration. But Soura's hiring never was announced formally and Soura has worked behind-the-scenes since.

Soura was appointed to lead the 640-person Pennsylvania Department of Administration in June 2010, which handles information technology, human resources, records management and travel for 25 agencies in that state. He formerly worked in the Pennsylvania governor's Office of Budget.

Haley spokesman Rob Godfrey described Soura's job duties in a statement: "Christian Soura's primary responsibilities include: identifying cost savings in state government and coordinating Cabinet-wide efforts to streamline services. While he is not directly involved in the budget, any project that saves money has a budgetary impact."

Key lawmakers interviewed this week said they have never met Soura or seen evidence of his work.

"I've never heard of him," said state Rep. Dan Cooper, R-Anderson, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. But, with the state facing a \$700 million budget shortfall, Cooper said he was open to new ideas.

Senate Finance Committee chairman Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, said he also had not met Soura. While Soura's salary seems a bargain, Leatherman said past \$1-a-year employees, including Sanford administration Commerce Secretary Bob Faith, have not worked out well for the state.

"If you're paying a dollar a year, you get what you pay for," Leatherman said. "Unless you really pay a salary, it's hard to demand what they really do for the taxpayer." Haley's top two lieutenants, chief of staff Tim Pearson and deputy chief of staff Trey Walker, both have experience on presidential campaigns. That has prompted speculation Haley may have brought Soura in to replace one of them if either leaves for a 2012 presidential campaign.

Soura said that is not the case, adding he has not been promised any future position. He said he plans to work for Haley for an undecided period of time before considering other options.

"I'm having a lot of fun," he said, "and, in the meantime, there is no shortage of work to do."