

Title: **SC DSS director adds executive positions**
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SC DSS director adds executive positions

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COLUMBIA - The state Department of Social Services, which is under orders from lawmakers to hire more caseworkers to help abused children, also has added several executive positions under the agency's new director and now has 18 employees making \$100,000 or more a year.

The agency provided the information to *The Greenville News* following a state Freedom of Information Act request.

DSS Director Susan Alford, who was hired by Gov. Nikki Haley last December, told members of the Senate DSS Oversight Subcommittee in late August that she is trying to modernize and reorganize the agency, which she said she found understaffed and spread too thin when she arrived.

"DSS is an agency that is recovering from a decade of budget cuts and other issues regarding its organizational

structure," she explained then. "We suffer not only from a lack of resources in the department but we also have spread our functions and responsibilities across the department to the degree that it has really interfered with good accountability."

Alford has hired a number of executives since taking office, some into

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new positions and some into vacant positions or modified positions. The agency employs about 3,800 workers.

The new executives include:

» Chief of staff Joan Meacham. Although the position is new, she replaces Holly Pisarik, who Haley brought in last year temporarily to serve as a special assistant to the director. Meacham previously worked as a real estate agent with Berkshire Hathaway Homes Service-Myrtle Beach Real Estate. Prior to her real estate job, Meacham had been in state government for almost three decades with the Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services and the Department of Juvenile Justice. She retired as the state director of probation, parole and pardon Services. Her annual salary is \$114,005.

» Deputy State Director of Administrative Services Barbara Derrick. She previously worked as deputy director of administration for the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and as deputy director of administration at the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation before that. Her annual salary at the new position is

\$129,682.

» Ombudsman Pam Bryant. She previously worked as the director of public information with Clemson University Youth Learning Institute, where Alford previously worked. Her salary is \$95,000.

» Interim Deputy State Director of Child Welfare Taron Davis. The position formerly was titled deputy state director of human services. Davis previously worked as a DSS attorney. Davis' current salary is \$109,222 but an agency spokeswoman said that is because of an adjustment due to her interim appointment. Her base salary, she said, is lower than \$100,000.

» Director of Communications and Legislative Affairs Karen Luchka Wingo. She previously worked as a partner with Fisher & Phillips LLP, a national business law firm. Her annual salary is \$100,000.

» Director of Adult Advocacy Jessica Hanak-Coulter. She previously worked as Deputy Director of Human Services at DSS. Her annual salary is \$100,000.

The agency now has 18 staff earning \$100,000 or more a year, according to

DSS and the state's salary database. In addition to those above, they include: Anita Khetspal, a child psychiatrist and Herbert Spencer, psychiatrist, both paid on an hourly basis; Anthony Catone, general counsel, \$135,000; Amber Gillum, deputy director economic services, \$121,890; Katie Morgan, child support services director, \$119,610; David Lawson, director of information technology, \$115,963; Stephen McCauley, information security director, \$114,000; Funneaser Jacobs, director of human resources, \$113,642; William Bray, director of finance, \$109,134; Jose Encarnacion, Information Technology Manager II, \$106,012; Gwendolyn Babb, attorney, \$100,628; and J. Daniel Edens, procurement director, \$100,000.

Alford's annual salary is \$159,130.

After a series of legislative hearings and a stinging audit last year prior to Alford's arrival concerning the agency's handling of child abuse and neglect cases, lawmakers provided more money so DSS could hire hundreds of new caseworkers and staff to lower caseloads.

Lawmakers authorized the hiring of 177 more staff in the current budget year

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and DSS has asked for \$32.6 million in next year's budget, including money to hire 157 additional staff.

Wingo said 146 of the 177 positions have been filled.

The agency currently operates a budget of \$692 million, but only about \$133 million of that comes from the state's General Fund, according to legislative budget records. Most of the agency's budget comes from the federal government.

Lawmakers have registered concerns in the past about the hiring of supervisors along with caseworkers because they want the focus to be on lowering caseloads. Some caseworkers still handle 50 or more children each and a handful handle 100 or more. The agency has set a goal of no more than 24 children per worker.

Sen. Tom Young, an Aiken Republican and chairman of the Senate Oversight Subcommittee, said the panel will address the salary issue at its next meeting.

"The testimony that we have received is that we need more caseworkers on the front lines to reduce caseloads," he told *The News*. "While it appears that the agency is making progress and 56 substandard day cares have recently been closed, this new management salary information is troubling in view of the agency's most recent budget request. Again, we will get to the bottom of it."

However, Sen. Joel Lourie, a Columbia Democrat on the panel, said legislators need to give Alford time to manage the agency. He said it is easy to criticize any agency director for adding executive positions.

"At the end of the day, what I am most concerned with is results," he said. "I think if she was coming in and making administrative requests but not adding caseworkers, I think all of us would be blowing a gasket right now. But the bulk of her requests, the significant majority of her requests, the money is going to add caseworkers and bring down caseloads. If there are some layers of management that are missing to help the agency run more efficiently, I think we owe her that consideration."

Sen. Katrina Shealy, a Lexington County Republican who sits on the panel, said lawmakers are hoping Alford can better organize the agency.

"I think we have to give her that chance to do what she thinks is the best thing," she said. "I'm not going to question what she's done there until I see the outcome. I think we need more caseworkers. I don't think we need more supervisors."

Shealy said the agency has struggled with keeping caseworkers. The agency's turnover rate last year was 39 percent, which has dropped this year.

"We need to be working on that harder than making new positions," she said. "I don't want to tell her how to run the agency because I'm not there on a day to day basis. But what I would say is we need to look more at boots on the ground instead of people in supervisory positions."

Alford has reorganized the child welfare division within the agency. Previously, Hanak-Coulter served as deputy director of human services and oversaw both child welfare and adult protective services. She now serves as the director

of a new adult advocacy division. The title of deputy director of human services has changed to deputy director of child welfare. Davis oversees a reorganized child welfare division under which regional leaders now report as well as officials overseeing child welfare operations and compliance. The regional leaders will now supervise county DSS directors.

"I believe that's going to create a much higher level of accountability," Alford told senators concerning the child welfare reorganization.

She said she wants to raise the attention on vulnerable adults, which she said previously had become "marginalized" at the agency.

She said Derrick will be responsible for finance, procurement, human resources and information technology services in the agency. Previously, she said, the managers of those services reported directly to the agency's director.

Alford said she also wants to make sure caseworkers and other employees are working on the jobs they were hired to do. She said because of a lack of resources in the past, caseworkers were working on adult protection and licensing cases in addition to child welfare cases.

"What I'm trying to say is the folks who are hired to do certain functions are doing many other functions," she told senators. "And until we can get that stabilized and get enough staff in place, to where folks are doing the jobs they were asked to do and provide the kind of supervision they were asked to do, we won't be able to become the agency that we need to be."

Title: **State to take less out of pay checks**
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State to take less out of pay checks

Changes take place starting January 2017

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COLUMBIA - South Carolina's tax agency plans to leave more of your money in your paycheck.

Starting on Jan 1, 2017, the agency will reduce the amount withheld from S.C. taxpayers for state income taxes throughout the year, said director Rick Reames.

That is the good news.

The bad news?

The withholding change will reduce the amount S.C. taxpayers get back in state tax refunds each spring.

"This is going to put \$1 billion back in people's paychecks, rather than having them loan it to the government

on an interest-free basis," Reames said.

The first year of the changes would leave \$73 more in the paychecks of a married couple filing jointly with two children and a combined taxable income of \$10,000 or more, according to initial estimates by the Department of Revenue.

While the first year will see a relatively low amount left to paychecks, a greater amount will be left in paychecks in future years.

For example, the same couple would see \$365 more to their paychecks in Year 5 and \$730 more in

Year 10.

However, the added take-home pay will vary depending on a taxpayer's filing status. For example, the amount would change if a taxpayer is single or files with a different number of exemptions.

The changes will benefit primarily lower income taxpayers, married taxpayers and taxpayers with children, Reames said. Those taxpayers now have a greater portion of their paycheck withheld, he said.

The average size of state income

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tax refunds has been growing every year, said Reames, who is appointed by Gov. Nikki Haley. The state also has been issuing more refunds every year.

"In South Carolina, we're withholding way too much," Reames said. "Nearly everybody gets a refund."

The state withholds too much because it has not changed its withholding guidelines for 25 years, Reames said. Those guidelines have not been updated to reflect changes in federal tax laws, including higher

federal standard and personal deductions.

Reames said the Revenue Department will phase in the changes so that they are not a shock to taxpayers who count on large refunds each spring and the state's general fund.

There will be an initial decrease in the state's general fund budget revenues, however, the reductions will even out, Reames said. That's because, while the state now collects too much in withholding taxes throughout the year, it has to refund overpaid taxes each spring through refunds.

Excessive withhold-

ings throughout the year and excessive refunds the following year increase volatility to the state budget and make it difficult to forecast and predict future revenues, according to the Revenue Department.

South Carolina Board of Economic Advisors chairman Chad Walldorf said updating the withholding guidelines will provide a more accurate picture of state revenues as they are collected.

"While it's really just a timing issue that we are discussing, I would always be in favor of letting taxpayers keep more of

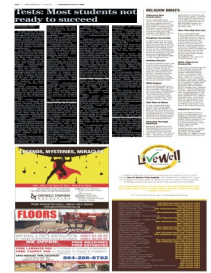
their wages than providing an interest-free, short-term loan to the government."

State Rep. Chip Huggins, R-Lexington, who chairs a House subcommittee on income tax, agreed.

"This is the better thing for our taxpayers," said Huggins. "They're going to be getting their money throughout the year."

The Revenue Department also sees the change as a cost-saving opportunity because processing refunds to taxpayers requires staff and resources.

Title: **Tests: Most students not ready to succeed**
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Tests: Most students not ready to succeed

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Results from the first year of statewide testing through ACT and ACT Aspire show the majority of South Carolina students across multiple grade levels aren't prepared to succeed in school and failed to meet college-readiness benchmarks.

As a whole, 11th-grade students across the state, all of whom took the ACT college-readiness test for the first time, failed to meet the college-readiness benchmarks in all four ACT subject areas: English, mathematics, reading and science.

The vast majority of students in grades three through eight didn't score "ready" or above on reading and writing portions of the new ACT Aspire test, which was given to all students in those grades for the first time last April.

Local education officials said some of the new tests were only loosely aligned to state standards taught in the classroom, which may have affected results.

The results should serve as a warning for South Carolina students, families and policy makers as the state recruits industry but faces a shortage of educated workers to fill those jobs in the coming years, said Melanie Barton, Education Oversight Committee's executive director.

"A high school diploma no longer will meet the demands of the 21st century

jobs in South Carolina and no longer will provide a living wage for our families," Barton said in a statement.

She said state lawmakers and Gov. Nikki Haley should be commended for recognizing the state needed to measure whether

its students were prepared for two- or four-year colleges or industry certification.

Molly Spearman, state education superintendent, said South Carolina is raising its standards to ensure graduates are college and career ready.

Adopting more rigorous standards requires an adjustment as the state's public education system adjusts to a more challenging academic environment, she said.

"We want to raise expectations of student achievement and ensure that our children have the resources to succeed," Spearman said. "District staff, principals, teachers and parents must all work together to ensure our students are college and career ready, and I have great confidence that we're headed in the right direction."

Among 11th-graders statewide, 82.1 percent of students were labeled "not ready" in science. Also, 78.4 percent were "not ready" in math, and 74.2 percent in reading and 61.3 percent in English.

The state's mean score for English was 16.5 com-

pared to an ACT benchmark of 18. In math, students scored 18.1, below the benchmark of 22. In reading, they scored 18.3 to a benchmark of 22. And in science, they scored 18.1, compared to a benchmark of 23.

The ACT benchmarks are scores on the ACT subject-area tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses, according to ACT.

Locally, students from Anderson 1, Greenville and Pickens outperformed the state composite score of 17.9 on the ACT college-readiness test.

Anderson 1 scored a 19 overall. Greenville scored 18.8. Pickens scored 18.7.

The ACT Aspire test indicated poorer results across the state, but local education officials said it was difficult to compare those results with the education taking place in the classroom because teachers and students were unfamiliar with the test and because the test is not aligned to state standards.

For instance, just 16.2 percent of third graders rated "ready" or above on the writing test, but it's a timed test and many students were unprepared to write timed essays. The

scores rose slightly for higher grades, peaking at 36.1 ready in sixth grade.

In reading, 31.8 percent of third graders achieved "ready" or above. By eighth grade, 46.7 percent were "ready."

Math scores were slightly better, though scores dropped from a high of 58 percent "ready" in third grade to a low of 32 percent "ready" by eighth grade.

Students scored highest in English, ranging from 65.1 percent "ready" in third grade to 70.8 percent in eighth grade.

Still, local districts generally outperformed the state on the Aspire test.

"It is unfortunate that the results don't show more of the great things that are happening, but I think that's more a function of the test than the activities and enrichment the students receive," said Jason McCreary, Greenville County Schools director of accountability and quality assurance.

For one, the Aspire test predicts college-readiness rating, which is difficult to interpret in third grade since it's not aligned to what students are learning in the classroom, he said.

"We're just focused on teaching the state standards to get them ready for the next level," he said.

Students across the

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state and in Greenville performed better on the SCPASS exam, given to fourth-through-eighth graders in social studies and science. Those tests are closely aligned to state standards, McCreary said.

In a statement, Anderson 1 also said the Aspire

was only loosely based on state standards. Superintendent David Havird said the test could be helpful in identifying gaps in student learning early on so staff could assist students.

“The students in Anderson 1 responded well to the challenge of a more rigorous test and particu-

larly a timed writing test,” said Jane Harrison, assistant superintendent for instruction.

The results come as the state works to procure a statewide assessment for this school year. Teachers, students and staff don’t know yet which test or tests they will take this

spring. McCreary called it “unfortunate” that the state is in this position again after confusion last year, but state officials were trying to get it right with selection of a statewide assessment.

“South Carolina’s got to get the assessment right for our students,” he said.