

*Louisiana lawmakers OK raises for certain state employees The Associated Press State & Local Wire November 21, 2003, Friday, BC cycle*

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**HEADLINE:** Louisiana lawmakers OK raises for certain state employees

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**BODY:**

Lawmakers approved pay raises for the state superintendent of education Friday and 67 employees in the secretary of state's office.

Cecil Picard's salary as education superintendent was boosted from \$162,000 to \$180,000 based on his performance and as an attempts to move the pay to something comparable with other states, said Paul Pastorek, head of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The education board approved the pay raise in October, retroactive to the beginning of the new fiscal year in July. The Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget agreed to the pay hike Friday with no discussion.

Raises for 67 employees in the secretary of state's office got much more discussion, as lawmakers questioned whether those raises would start a series of midyear budget requests for pay hikes from other departments or whether the money could be better spent to help the state with budget shortfalls next year.

First Assistant Secretary of State Al Ater said the office was having a hard time keeping employees because the pay for certain jobs was so low. For example, the purchasing office has had 100 percent turnover in three years, he said.

The office had extra money from fee collections and planned to use \$215,000 for the raises. Ater stressed the money was targeted to specific jobs based on need and highest rates of turnover, not just to dole out pay increases.

"If we were wanting to be Santa Claus, we'd go in across the board and adjust everybody in the agency's salaries," he said. "We have really tried to do this right. We have tried to target a problem."

Sen. Ken Hollis, R-Metairie, said he thought the regular budget process during the legislative session was the more appropriate way to handle a **pay raise** while Sen. **Jay Dardenne**, R-Baton Rouge, said he worried about using the cash for **pay raises** when the state had a predicted general fund shortage next year.

But the pay raise was approved by the budget committee without objection.

In other actions, the committee was told:

-A seven-month-old cap on the number of free prescriptions for certain Louisiana Medicaid recipients is estimated to save the state \$15 million to \$35 million in the current fiscal year that ends June 30. The limit on prescriptions is eight per month for certain types of Medicaid patients.

-The state Department of Health and Hospitals estimates if Medicaid spending continues at the current rate, the department would have a \$14 million deficit for the year. That amount is tiny in the large \$4.8 billion budget, and DHH Secretary David Hood said it was just an update for lawmakers, nothing to worry about.

-The state's charity hospitals have reduced their spending by \$14 million in the first quarter but still have to cut another \$52 million from their budget in the remaining months of the fiscal year. LSU hospital system chief Jim Brexler said the hospitals were on target to close the spending gap by scaling back services, including having laid off more than 100 people.