

The Legislative Report

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AUSTIN: The new head of the state agency that oversees the state's troubled institutes for people with mental disabilities will be Chris Traylor who now heads the state's Medicaid program.

Traylor, 47, will take over as commissioner of the Department of Aging & Disability Services on January 1st. Governor Rick Perry has approved the appointment.

The department has 18,000 employees and an annual budget of \$6.8 billion. The agency's 13 living center (formerly called state schools) have been under scrutiny from the U.S. Department of Justice for possibly failing in some cases to provide proper security to protect residents from harm.

The state's Department of Information Resources has hired the high-level executive whose job will be to herd the \$863 million data center consolidation toward completion.

Ed Swedberg, the Texas Comptroller's assistant director of technology, will start on December 7th as deputy executive director of data center services.

The comptroller's office is one of the few state agencies that have been exempted from the consolidation project, which has been besieged by data losses, delays, and agency frustration. The state is in the process of renegotiating its agreement with IBM Corp. which is spearheading the massive effort, in order to get the project on track to completion.

On the political scene, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison said on November 24th that if elected governor, her education plan would focus on bringing more technology to the classroom and retaining teachers, lowering the high school dropout rate and helping school districts find ways to save money.

Hutchison is challenging Gov. Rick Perry in the March Republican primary.

She said she would like to expand loan reimbursement programs such as Teach for Texas and Teach for America. She would also like every college and university in the state to offer a version of the University of Texas' UTeach program, which recruits and trains math, science and computer science majors to become high school teachers.

She would also like to offer teachers the option of a "cafeteria plan," so that if they choose not to enroll in the health coverage plan for teachers, they could instead enroll in something else like a child care program or a tuition savings plan.

A Perry spokesman said that Hutchison was offering education proposals that already exist. In doing so, he said, she is acknowledging "that the education policies adopted by Gov. Perry are effective in preparing students."

Out on the stump, former Vice President Dick Cheney came to Houston to headline a campaign rally and fundraiser for Sen. Hutchison. Cheney has endorsed her candidacy for the governorship.

However, the senator had to remain in Washington for the Senate health care vote. This underscored the difficulty of running for governor while serving in the Senate. Hutchison said she wouldn't get on a plane if there was any chance a vote might be called. She has made the health care battle and the upcoming cap-and-trade fight her priorities.

The senator said late last month that she would remain in the U.S. Senate through the gubernatorial primary.