

## Child welfare pay hikes sought

### Panel calls for \$75M more for workers

By Mike Ward  
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — A Senate committee on Monday recommended spending \$75.3 million for emergency pay hikes for front-line workers in the state's troubled child-protection programs, and to hire 100 additional investigators to catch up on a chronic backlog of abuse and neglect inquiries.

"Ensuring the safety and protection of our state's most vulnerable children is one of the Texas Legislature's most

important responsibilities," said Senate Health and Human Services Committee Chairman Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown. "We owe it to the children of Texas to get this right."

Schwertner heads a special work group of the budget-writing Senate Finance Committee that had been seeking a stop-gap solution to problems in the Department of Family and Protective Services amid demands that the state reduce its backlog of more than 2,800 children who had not been seen by officials — some for

months — even though they had been reported as victims of abuse or neglect.

Senate Finance Chairman Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, said the recommendation immediately would be taken under advisement by the budget panel, which will have to find a funding source.

No source was specified in the announcement of the recommendations by officials, although Nelson said she intends to find the money quickly.

Monday's announcement



Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, said: "We owe it to the children of Texas to get this right."

came after two court-appointed experts in a federal court case in which a judge declared Texas' foster-care system unconstitutional recommended sweeping changes in the operations of that program, including the hiring of additional staff and initiatives to reduce skyrocketing staff turnover.

A spokesman said Abbott supports the additional fund-

ing and staff requested by DFPS Commissioner Henry "Hank" Whitman Jr.

"As the governor said months ago, he has a primary goal: no more child deaths in Texas," press secretary John Wittman said. "We will continue working with the House and Senate to immediately secure additional resources to address the crisis facing our child welfare system and protect the children of Texas."

Schwertner said the pay increases were designed to help the child-protection agency reduce turnover, and the additional staff positions — 100

*Agency pay continues on A4*



Photos by Jerry Lara / San Antonio Express-News

Landon Phoenix, 4, gives a thumbs up after voting in an election at the Pre-K 4 SA South Education Center. Students at all four Pre-K 4 SA centers went to the polls Monday to vote for one of three nonprofits that would benefit from fundraising efforts.

## Preschoolers vote, too

By Silvia Foster-Frau  
STAFF WRITER

A long line of San Antonio voters sang a song as they made their way to the ballot boxes Monday morning.

"We are walking down the hall very quiet, we are walking down the hall in a line," they sang to the tune of the song "If You're Happy and You Know It (Clap Your Hands)."

The vocal voters were preschool students at the South Side center of Pre-K 4 SA, who made their way single file from their classroom to a lounge area converted into a polling location. After signing in and heading to a makeshift voting booth manned by teachers and parent volunteers, they cast their ballots on iPads for one of three local nonprofits: St. PJ's, Any Baby Can or Children's Rehabilitation Institute of TeletonUSA.

Across all four Pre-K 4 SA sites, thousands of students voted to choose the nonprofit that will be supported through fundraising and volunteer work by Pre-K 4 SA students, teachers and parent volunteers for the rest of the academic year.

Last year they raised close to \$10,000 for San Antonio Pets Alive, said Adriana Becerra, assistant director of curricu-

### Pre-K 4 SA students choose a nonprofit to help



Kaylene Cook, 4, gets help casting her vote from Pre-K 4 SA South Education Center Director Belinda Gonzalez.

lum and accreditation for Pre-K 4 SA.

"We're voting to help people," said Jayce Mujica, a 4-year-old in a bright red shirt waiting in line. He and his classmates clutched little pieces of paper with their nonprofit of choice in hand, "to remind them of who they chose to vote for," said their teacher, Kelly

McManus.

Each year, the city preschool program holds its own election the day before general elections with the idea that it will also encourage the children's parents to go and vote the following day.

"Children at risk do not usually participate in their community. By engaging them

in this type of thing, you're fostering civic engagement in their life and their parents' life," said Becerra.

While there are only roughly 2,000 students total, almost 2,400 votes were cast because of parent and staff participation, something Becerra said was very important to the preschool's mission.

Jayce cast his ballot for Any Baby Can.

"They have a lot of sick people and I just want them to be happy over again," he said, now sporting a red "I voted" sticker.

There were some children who said they were voting for an organization based on its logo, referring to Any Baby Can as "the train one" or CRIT U.S.A. "as the heart one." Becerra said she found that the children's reasoning for voting for a particular nonprofit "really mirrors" current presidential elections, with some voting based on marketing and others based on what they had learned about the candidates.

One of Pre-K 4 SA's main missions is to introduce the children to civic engagement. At the south center, there's a room designed like San Antonio, which includes representations of the Mi Tierra restaurant and the Alamo.

*Kids vote continues on A4*

## Exit polls inform TV stats

### Pollsters will be at 933 U.S. sites

By Dylan Baddour  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Tonight will be a TV spectacle. As the sun sweeps westward across the nation, polls will close in its wake. As soon as that happens, cable news stations and online media will report election results, beginning the end of this marathon race.

Those live results will not be official, or even tabulated on the voting machines, but based on exit polls commissioned by a consortium of major news organizations, including ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox and the Associated Press.

Those exit polls exist "to provide convenience for the public and the media," said Kay Stimson, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Secretaries of State.

Without them, the country would have to wait hours for states to post their unofficial results. Official results come days or weeks later, after a review process to ensure every ballot has been counted.

Media reports of the results don't come as early as they used to. In 2000, major TV news networks called Democrat Al Gore the winner of the presidential race in Florida — and implicitly, nationwide — before the polls were closed. They got it wrong. George W. Bush became president.

The debacle was slammed as "a foolish race for monetary bragging rights and a tiny ratings advantage" by a 2001 report from the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, organized by the University of Virginia's Miller Center for Public Affairs.

As a result of lessons learned in that election, media outlets now won't declare a winner until polls are closed, said Nicole Hemmer, an assistant professor who studies politics and media at the Miller Center.

"The calls come out right at closing time," Hemmer said. "They (media outlets) have that call ready to go."

The call is based on exit poll data from Edison Research sent to the National Election Pool members. Joe Lenski, the firm's executive vice president, said Edison will have pollsters at 933 locations around the country and has been interviewing more than 16,000 absentee and early voters by phone.

The results stay under quarantine until 5 p.m. Eastern Time, when they are shared with NEP members. Media outlets may cite the data then, but cannot use it to project a race winner until polls have closed. That time varies by

*Coverage continues on A4*

## Man falls from landmark to his death

By Jacob Beltran  
STAFF WRITER

A man fell almost 400 feet to his death Monday afternoon from the Smith-Young Tower, a downtown landmark commonly known as the Tower Life

Building, police said.

Witnesses said the man hit the ground next to a woman who was putting change in a parking meter.

The man, in his 40s, was seen entering the building and accessing the rooftop at the

29th or 30th floor by himself, and his death is being investigated as a possible suicide, San Antonio Police Department Sgt. Curtis Walker said. Detectives were working to identify the man, Walker said.

Some witnesses said the man

wore a reflective vest and that a crew was at work in the building, said Robbie Rodgers, who was at the scene shortly after the incident.

Tower Life officials were not available for comment Monday night.

## METRO



Photos by Jerry Lara / San Antonio Express-News

Pre-K 4 SA students at the South Education Center vote for one of three nonprofits that will be helped via fundraising and volunteer work by Pre-K 4 SA students, teachers and parent volunteers for the rest of the academic year.

## KIDS VOTE

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“We want to instill a love for San Antonio so regardless of what they do when they grow up, they still feel committed to their city,” Becerra said.

The center held a rally outside at 1:30 p.m. to announce the winning nonprofit. About 500 students were given small instruments and the teachers blasted music by popular artists, encouraging the children to dance. Jayce wiggled his hips and hit his head with blue drumsticks.

As the teachers began a countdown for the big reveal, students hit their knees in drumroll-fashion.

“Are you ready to find out who we’re going to help?” said Belinda Gonzalez, the South Education Center director.

The kids whooped and screamed in anticipation. The teachers unfurled a yellow poster covered in glitter glue and permanent marker with the words “Any Baby Can,” and the crowd of children cheered.

Any Baby Can won with 869 votes, a 93-point lead over St. PJ’s. Overall, 2,387 votes were cast.

But the lesson for the preschoolers wasn’t over.

“Tomorrow there’s a big vote. Do any of you know what’s going to happen tomorrow?” Gonzalez asked, to an incoherent response. She went on to explain the election for the president of the United



JERRY LARA / San Antonio Express-News

The preschoolers celebrate after their election. This year, Any Baby Can won the election.

**“When you vote, you help people and you make a difference. So thank you for making a difference today.”**

*Belinda Gonzalez, director of the Pre-K 4 SA South Education Center*

States and its significance to the children.

“So today when you go home, I want all of you to take

your sticker and tell your mommy and daddy: ‘Look Mom, look Dad, I voted today. My voice is counting to other people. Tomorrow is your job to get out and vote.’ Can you promise me that?” said Gonzalez. “Because when you vote, you help people and you make a difference. So thank you for making a difference today.”

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## COVERAGE

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state.

Each network will have its own methods for calling races, but they all will depend largely on the Associated Press, which has election night staff in every state, coordinated by a bureau in Washington, D.C.

In a video posted online by the AP, political reporter Stephen Ohlemacher said the race watchers would be looking for

exit poll data giving one candidate “a lead big enough to cover sampling error several times” in order to call a race.

If the race is too close to call, the AP will wait for unofficial vote tallies from the counties. Those won’t be available until folks are through voting, which could be a few hours after polling places close. As more precincts report and one candidate claims a significant lead, the AP may make the decision to call a race.

In Texas, counties update

their data through an online portal to the Texas Secretary of State, and the state tabulates results of statewide races.

The results will remain unofficial until each county waits five days for overseas ballots and processes all provisional ballots, then conducts a canvass to sniff out flukes or anomalies. The political parties and campaigns watch that process, which might last for up to several weeks after election night.

Based on the official results, each state will appoint a slate

of electors, which was previously picked by the political party of the winning candidate. In Texas, the electors have no legal obligation to support the candidate chosen by the state vote, but until now they always have, said Brandon Rottinghaus, who teaches Texas politics at the University of Houston.

The electors will cast their ballots on Dec. 19, finalizing the presidential election.

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## AGENTS

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corruption that weren’t as strong as they should have been, (and) you have the potential for problems.”

Since taking over as U.S. customs commissioner in 2014, Gil Kerlikowske has moved to crack down on corruption and make the agency more transparent. Yet in just the past year, several South Texas-based agents in the nation’s largest law enforcement agency, pledged to defend against cross-border drug trafficking and human smuggling, now stand accused of casting their lot with criminals.

A year ago, Cameron County sheriff’s investigators charged Border Patrol agent Joel Luna and four others, including two of his brothers, in connection with the beheading of a Honduran immigrant, a grisly murder they said had links to the Gulf Cartel.

Luna had been assigned to a checkpoint in Hebbbronville.

Investigators found 3 pounds of cocaine, half an ounce of methamphetamine, nearly \$90,000 in cash, a ledger documenting the sale of narcotics and a vintage engraved pistol in a safe belonging to him. His trial is expected to begin early next year.

In another case, authorities in May indicted several Texas lawmen on drug trafficking charges, among them Border Patrol agent Daniel Polanco. A federal investigation dubbed Operation Blue Shame linked Polanco to a far-reaching probe into a cocaine trafficking organization.

“The corrosive and corruptive force of the drug trade knows no bounds, and unfortunately it affects just about every agency,” said Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations at the Drug Enforcement Administration and the author of “Deal,” about his time as an undercover agent. “You’re always going to find a few bad apples, but that shouldn’t taint the entire organization. That is why the drug trade is a security

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*Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations at the Drug Enforcement Administration*

threat.”

Bazan’s alleged transgression took place in February 2007, but authorities didn’t learn of it until October 2013, when agents with Homeland Security Investigations in McAllen interviewed a confidential informant, according to a criminal complaint. The informant told of a drug trafficking organization in the Rio Grande Valley pilfering narcotics from other traffickers with the help of corrupt law enforcement officers. The officers would seize less valuable or fake loads of narcotics to allow traffickers to sell the real drugs without the need to pay suppliers, the document states.

“The drug trafficking organization coordinated staged narcotic seizures of sham, or dilut-

ed, narcotics with the assistance of law enforcement officials, which enabled the organization to steal drug loads from unwitting narcotics sources of supply,” the complaint says.

Investigators say one such cocaine seizure took place near the McAllen Border Patrol station with Bazan’s assistance. Federal agents searched the agency database for the report Bazan filed in 2007 detailing the incident.

When HSI agents recently interviewed Bazan, he recalled seizing the load, telling investigators that border agents had discovered bundles of cocaine in a Honda Civic, the criminal complaint says. At first, Bazan denied being tipped off to the location of the drug load and to

## AGENCY PAY

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investigators and 36 support staff — would help ease a critical staff shortage in several offices, especially in Houston and Dallas.

“These additional front-line investigators will help ensure that children at the highest risk of abuse are contacted by CPS within hours or days, not weeks or months,” Schwertner said.

The recommendations include a 20 percent annual salary increase for supervisors of front-line caseworkers, a 20 percent annual salary increase for special investigators, and a 10 percent to 15 percent salary increase for program directors, administrators and other supervisors.

The additional staffing and pay increases had been requested by Whitman, a former Texas Ranger who was named last spring to turn around the embattled agency and fix various chronic problems that have plagued Texas’ child-protect-

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*Sen. Charles Schwertner, Senate Health and Human Services Committee chairman*

tion programs for more than two decades.

With a federal court now considering imposing the special masters’ recommendations, perhaps early next year, sweeping changes for the troubled programs appear to be a certainty.

Of the \$75.3 million, Schwertner said \$67.6 million will come from state funding and the rest from federal funds.

Schwertner said that as a condition for the additional funding, the agency will have to provide weekly updates to the Senate on the number of high-priority children who are not being seen fast enough by state workers, a plan for the agency to see abused and neglected children much faster than they do now, and detailed reports on turnover rates among staff and the reasons employees are leaving.

In a statement, state Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, said the recommendation “is just the start, and there is much more left to be done to examine the needs of children in the care of Child Protective Services, as well as the hardworking state employees that work with those children every day.”

“We can’t stop there,” he said. “We must look comprehensively at how we care for some of the most vulnerable children in Texas and ensure the state is creating a safe haven.”

Nelson said the work group will conduct “a deep dive” into the Child Protective Services budget and the agency’s appropriations request in preparation for the next legislative session, which begins in January.

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