



# MIDLANDS

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SECTION B

## State court, probation workers' pay on low end

Upcoming raises won't be enough to put salaries at market value, but officials say they are all state could afford

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LINCOLN — An effort to boost below-market salaries of state court and probation workers has fallen short of its goal.

However, about 1,100 workers still will get 75 percent of the raises recommended by a recent salary study.

State court officials said the

pay increases were the best possible given the funding authorized by the Legislature.

But an official with the Omaha police union said it's another example of the state "short-changing" the law enforcement system — particularly in terms of salaries for probation officers.

"You can't put a price on public safety, but you sure need to invest in it," said Sgt. John Wells, the

president of the Omaha Police Officers Association. "We seem to pay lip service to it ... time and time again."

Wells said it's particularly troubling because state prison reform efforts are focused on giving more responsibility to probation officers to manage criminals. The Legislature this year approved steps that would divert at least 473 inmates to less-costly proba-

tion programs rather than prison in the first year.

One court employee, however, said getting three-fourths of the recommended raises is a lot better than nothing.

"This gives us an opportunity to catch up," said Tom Hawes, the clerk magistrate of the Adams County Court and past president of the Nebraska County Court

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## Salaries: State pays 'lip service' to safety, union rep says

Association.

For the past several years there have been complaints that salaries for state court employees and probation officers in Nebraska have lagged behind those in comparable jobs in this state and neighboring states. But efforts to boost pay were put off during the recent recession.

The problem has been especially evident in Omaha, where the turnover rate for juvenile probation workers is nearly three times the state average — 31 percent versus 11 percent.

Low pay has been blamed. The starting salary for probation officers, a job that requires a college degree, is currently \$31,304.

State Sen. Burke Harr of Omaha, who introduced a bill last year that would have given court employees a 7 percent wage increase in both 2013-14 and 2014-15, said it's a "shame" that some court clerical workers qualify for food stamps.

"We trust these individuals to carry out our judicial system. We should probably pay them

accordingly," Harr said.

A salary study completed in January by the National Center for State Courts found that the salaries of 43 percent of state court workers were 5 percent lower or more than prevailing wages for comparable jobs in neighboring states and within Nebraska. Some of the workers earned 23 percent to 28 percent less.

Clerk magistrates were among the lowest paid compared with those in comparable positions, earning 23 percent less. Probation officer salaries were 15 percent to 16 percent below market rates.

Salaries in the county court system, which is state funded, have traditionally lagged behind comparable jobs in Nebraska district courts, which are funded by the counties. County court administrators were paid between \$14,000 and \$26,000 less a year, according to a 2007 comparison of wages in county and district courts in Nebraska's three largest counties.

The State Supreme Court, which determines salaries for

state court workers, asked for authorization to spend \$4.5 million this year to bring salaries up to the wages suggested in the salary study.

But the Legislature provided only \$1.5 million and told the court to utilize money saved by cutting back on court travel expenses in recent years to finance the rest of the salary hikes.

Omaha Sen. Heath Mello, who heads the legislative committee that draws up the state budget, said lawmakers intended to increase the salaries over a couple of years.

The funding for the raises was vetoed for the second consecutive year by Gov. Dave Heineman, who said he wanted the money devoted to property tax relief. But unlike a year ago, the Legislature overrode his veto this year.

Mello said the veto override showed that lawmakers were committed to public safety. He added that the Legislature took a second step to help probation officers by providing \$282,000 to reclassify several officers who handle high-risk offenders. That

gave them a raise by placing them in a higher salary classification.

That, the senator said, was an effort to prevent higher-skilled probation officers from leaving for other jobs.

The Supreme Court recently informed its employees that the overall raises, which take effect July 1, will be only 75 percent of what was recommended by the study. Those increases would be on top of the 2.25 percent salary hikes authorized for all state workers. That means that an employee whose salary was 5 percent below average would get a 3.75 percent wage increase on top of the 2.25 percent.

About 1,140 workers will get the extra raises.

Eric Asboe, a fiscal analyst for the Nebraska Supreme Court, said the increases go "a long way" toward addressing the salary issues in the county court.

Asboe said the court hopes to persuade the Legislature to finance the additional 25 percent next year.

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