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COUNTY EMPLOYEES DOUBLING THEIR PAYCHECKS

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BODY:

Despite serious budget problems, Los Angeles County's overtime costs have soared, with some employees doubling their base salary by putting in extra hours.

A review of three of the five county departments that spent the most on overtime in 2002-03 reveals 1,395 employees earned more than \$10,000 apiece in overtime, 390 were able to boost their salaries more than 50 percent through overtime and eight employees more than doubled their annual income.

The disclosure fueled criticism that poor management has worsened the cash-strapped county's problems.

"This has got to violate sensible restrictions on the use of overtime," said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, who complained that there seems to be no "cost controls on overtime."

"It just seems to me that overtime is something that may be necessary during unusual bursts of activity, but should not be relied upon on an ongoing basis. It ends up being more costly for the taxpayer."

Steven B. Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said it's impossible to know how widespread overtime abuse is. Even assuming all the overtime is legitimate, the figures show there is a serious "management question" in county government

"When a person doubles their salary with overtime or makes over 50 percent of their salary in overtime, that indicates it would be prudent to hire more staff who can perform the same service at a lower rate. It indicates it's time for them to restructure their organization a bit."

Budget talks slated

The release of the payroll records - obtained under the California Public Records Act - comes as the Board of Supervisors is set to begin budget deliberations on Monday.

Thanks to an extra \$140 million in unexpected revenues, county officials no longer expect to have to close parks and libraries and lay off thousands of employees. But the county still faces the potential closure of 19 probation camps, cuts in sheriff's services and a \$33 million cut in services to the mentally ill.

Payroll and overtime records were reviewed for the Sheriff's Department, Probation Department and Department of Health Services.

The records were not available from the Department of Children and Family Services, and the Fire Department did not provide its data because the fire chief wanted to review the records before releasing them.

The payroll records showed that a deputy probation officer, paid \$60,019 a year, also pocketed an extra \$77,352 in overtime.

A probation camp cook made \$39,280 a year and also collected \$46,322 in overtime.

A hospital nurse practitioner, paid \$81,021 a year, also raked in \$93,967 in overtime.

And a hospital doctor in the Antelope Valley wound up becoming the highest-paid county employee in history, boosting her \$224,864 salary with \$70,690 in overtime for record-setting pay of \$295,554, surpassing the county's top salary of \$279,125 earned by her boss, Dr. Thomas Garthwaite, director of the county health department.

O.T. up sharply

Since 1997-98, the county's overtime costs have shot up from \$239 million to an anticipated \$306 million this fiscal year.

County officials said they are concerned about the rising amount of money spent on overtime and have been working to bring the costs down.

Officials said overtime for employees in these five departments is often unavoidable because they must work long hours to care for the sick at hospitals, rescue people in traffic accidents, put out fires, respond to public safety emergencies, oversee jail inmates and protect abused and neglected children.

"I think everybody knows that overtime is something that needs to be constantly watched in all those departments to make sure it's not abused," Auditor-Controller Tyler McCauley said. "But it's a constant problem to provide services while at the same time keeping overtime down."

In the past, county auditors have expressed concerns about overtime abuse among sheriff's employees and county lifeguards, models for the popular TV show "Baywatch," who have worked as much as 105 hours of overtime a month.

The Fire Department is expected to spend the most this fiscal year on overtime at \$106 million, followed by the Sheriff's Department at \$68 million; health department, \$60 million; DCFS, \$15 million; and the Probation Department, \$6 million. Probation Department officials noted that they have brought their overtime costs down from \$22 million five years ago.

Sheriff's attrition

From 1996-97 to 2001-02, the Sheriff's Department overtime spiked 39 percent from \$67 million to \$94 million, but the amount dropped to \$55 million in 2002-03. In explaining this year's expected spike in overtime, sheriff's officials note that the department has lost about 1,000 employees to attrition in the last two years.

"Police work is not a 9-to-5 business," sheriff's budget chief Paul Tanaka said. "Overtime can be driven by a deputy-involved shooting, a gang war, a terrorist act, a flood, riot or fire. You are always one natural disaster or major civil disturbance away from budgetary overtime."

The Sheriff's Department has a total of 15,000 employees, but salary and overtime information in this report was provided only for 2,208 sheriff's employees. The report does not indicate the type of work done by each person.

Of these, 177 earned more than \$10,000 in overtime, 10 boosted their salary by more than 50 percent and one doubled his salary of \$22,097 with \$25,900 in overtime. Another employee who earned \$135,875 in salary brought in \$71,156 in overtime.

In the health department, 1,031 employees earned more than \$10,000 in overtime, 338 boosted their pay by more than 50 percent and four doubled their salaries.

A nurse practitioner who earned an \$81,021 salary more than doubled his salary with \$93,967 in overtime.

A County/USC Medical Center nurse more than doubled her \$69,060 salary with \$76,863 in overtime.

A senior medical record technician at Olive View-UCLA Medical Center boosted his annual salary of \$42,812 by 82 percent with \$36,185 in overtime.

In the Probation Department, 187 employees earned more than \$10,000 in overtime, 42 boosted their salary by more than 50 percent and three more than doubled their salaries.

"Well-known strategy"

"It's not abuse, but it's a lot of overtime," said Robert Smythe, chief of the Administrative Services Bureau in the Probation Department.

"You can't just leave kids in the juvenile halls and camps unsupervised. We have vacations, people who call in sick, people who have to make hospital runs to take a kid to a hospital or clinic. Therefore, we pay people overtime to make up for those vacancies."

Although DCFS overtime information was not available, audits show that social workers and their supervisors are paid \$29,052 to \$60,467 a year, but can make an extra \$30,000 to \$60,000 a year in overtime.

"They can make up to \$100,000 a year by claiming ridiculous amounts of overtime," said a consultant who requested anonymity. "It's rampant. It's not an isolated circumstance."

"One worker said, 'I need to buy a big-screen TV. That means I have to plan X number of hours of overtime to have enough money to buy it. If I have a kid who is acting up, I'll wait until the kid really acts up and get overtime to fix the crisis.' It's a well-known strategy across the board."

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