

Sebelius signs bill for state employee raises

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Kansas State University accountant Jennyfer Owensby gushed with enthusiasm Friday at a ceremony marking implementation of a new market-driven pay plan for 41,000 state employees.

"It feels like we just came out of the dark ages," said Owensby, who traveled to the Statehouse with colleagues to witness signing of the reform bill by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

The bipartisan measure recognized salaries of thousands of state workers were far below market rates and that it was time to replace the seniority-based compensation system with a merit-oriented model that rewarded the best employees.

In addition, all state workers will pocket a 2.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment in the year starting July 1. The Legislature financed the first phase of a five-year program to raise wages of 7,750 state employees to market value. Longevity bonuses will go to workers hired before July 1.

A permanent oversight panel is to evaluate the transition to a more equitable compensation structure and report findings to the legislative and executive branches.

Sebelius said many Kansas public employees earned 45 percent less than people working similar jobs in other states. "This makes it hard to attract and retain quality workers to serve the people of Kansas," the governor said.

House Speaker Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls, said the state's "broken" pay system was due for overhaul. The approach in House Bill 2916 is a "big step forward with the state acknowledging the importance of its workforce," Neufeld said.

Rep. Pat George, a Dodge City Republican who served on a state commission on employee pay, said working on the two-year reform project was the most rewarding experience of his legislative career. The commission gathered input from Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate, as well as employees in state government.

The state pay matrix put in place during the 1960s no longer matched the needs of state employees, George said. "I believe in five years we will look back and find we did the right thing," he said. "Instead of lagging behind other states, we will be the gold standard other state employee pay plans strive to meet."

Janel Harder, administrative specialist in KSU's College of Education, said adoption of a performance-based salary process would boost morale in state government offices.

"There has been very low morale for many, many years," Harder said. "This will improve retention."

Harder and Owensby are members of Classified Senate on the Manhattan campus. The organization conducted a survey two years ago to determine how many classified employees at the university took on second jobs to make ends meet. The survey showed 43 percent had multiple jobs.