

Abbott's order agonizes DFPS staff

Employees: Agency near 'collapse' amid trans care investigations

By Cayla Harris
AUSTIN BUREAU

More than a dozen current and former child welfare employees told an Austin appeals court this week that Gov. Greg Abbott's directive to investigate families of transgender children is pushing the agency over "the brink of collapse."

Abbott's February order directed the Department of Family and Protective Services to open child abuse investigations if parents provide their transgender kids with gender-affirming care, such as hormone therapies and puberty blockers. The

agency has since launched several of those investigations despite legal challenges and national outrage over the policy.

"Professionals at DFPS did not enter the child protection profession to remove children from loving homes with parents or guardians merely because they follow medical advice and a doctor's care, only to place them in a foster care system that is riddled with actual abuse, sexual assault, and even sex trafficking," the 16 employees wrote.

DFPS has long been an embattled agency, but its staffing and morale problems have reached new heights this year.

About 1,900 employees have quit since January, the highest voluntary exit rate the department has seen since it became an independent agency in fall 2017.

In recent interviews, employees said they were overworked and underpaid, forced to work in dangerous environments and caught up in culture wars beyond the scope of their job.

Responding to accusations of politicization at the department, DFPS spokesman Patrick Crimmins said earlier this month that "there are many things beyond our control, but what we can control is our effort and deter-

DFPS continues on A5



Dylan Hollingsworth/Bloomberg

Gov. Greg Abbott in February directed welfare services to open child abuse investigations over kids' gender-affirming care.



William Luther/Staff photographer

Storm clouds build Wednesday behind a truck on River Bend Road near Comfort. The region is far behind on rainfall totals.

Rain moves in at last, but more is needed to conquer drought

By Elena Bruess
STAFF WRITER

After months of high temperatures and drought, San Antonio finally has had a bit of rain and even a bit of flooding. Weather forecasts for the next week or two are looking wet — a welcome break from all the heat, dead-looking trees and dried-up lawns.

A week of rain, however, is just a drop in the bucket in the face of this year's drought.

San Antonio is an entire foot behind in rainfall. The region has gotten only 7 inches of rain; it typically gets just over 20 inches by this time of year. In order to make up for all the rainless months, San Antonio will need weeks and weeks of steady rain at either above average or average rates.

"We would need significantly more rain over a longer period of time to have any real effect on the drought as it is," said Paul Bertetti, director of aquifer science at the Edwards Aquifer Authority. "Yes, we expect to have more rainfall in the near future, but that might just get us back up to normal amounts for this time of year."

An ideal scenario for San Antonio is enough rain to get the ground wet, which primes the system. The dry soil will lap up the water quickly, but once it's wet enough, another rainfall will soak in deeper and deeper, keeping the soil saturated for a while and working its way into the entire water system. As the weather grows cooler as well, the soil will not dry out as fast. However, another few weeks of

drought would dry the soil up again, which is why the rain has to be steady and consistent.

The location of the rainfall also matters during drought, Bertetti said. West of San Antonio, where the Frio and Nueces rivers are dried up, rainfall needs to fall north in the Edwards Plateau around Edwards or Real counties. That rain then will trickle into the rivers and eventually deposit into the Edwards Aquifer, filling up the declining system.

"Uvalde has essentially had declining water levels since 2019, which is not unlike what happened in 2011 and 2012," Bertetti said. "Fortunately, because of this rain, the Nueces has some flow, the Frio a little, but if they can maintain that for the next few weeks, then

the aquifer can recharge."

Additionally, La Nina, the weather phenomenon that causes high heat and drought, is letting up slightly — allowing tides of cold and rain to move in.

"We all have to be patient and understand that there's a certain lag for this system's response," Bertetti said. "It won't be immediate, but right now, longer-term predictions show the climate may be going back to normal, with normal rainfall conditions. That's good news for everyone."

Elena Bruess writes for the Express-News through Report for America, a national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms. ReportforAmerica.org. elena.bruess@express-news.net

Former constable trial gets Ranger in trouble

By Elizabeth Zavala
STAFF WRITER

A Texas Ranger who investigated former Bexar County Constable Michelle Barrientes Vela was scolded in court for disobeying the judge at Vela's public corruption trial.

Investigator Bradley Freeman's testimony Tuesday veered into a topic that the jury wasn't supposed to know about — Vela, 48, has been charged with three counts of official oppression, a Class A misdemeanor, besides the two counts of felony evidence tampering for which she is being tried.

"I will hold you in contempt, and it will take place later," state District Judge Velia J. Meza told Freeman. "Pursuant to the standing order, I have no other choice. That is the consequences to my order."

The charges against Vela stem from a 2019 Easter Sunday incident at Rodriguez Park on the West Side, where she is alleged to have coerced a park patron into giving her \$300 to reserve a pavilion he already had paid for.

Freeman was taking the jury through a timeline that prosecutor Dawn McCraw wrote on a large display, highlighting his various meetings with Susan Tristan, Vela's former custodian of records, to receive documents and give her a recording device to use in Vela's office, plus the evidence seized under search warrants with the help of the FBI.

When McCraw asked Freeman which offenses Vela had committed, based on his review of the evidence, he replied, "Tampering with evidence and official oppression."

It drew a stern objection from defense attorney and former Bexar County District Attorney Nicholas "Nico" LaHood. The jury left the room and a visibly angry LaHood stood before Meza, raised his voice, waved his arms and pointed at prosecutors.

Ranger continues on A5

Crenshaw, Greene headline dueling Texas youth summits

By Cayla Harris and Jasper Scherer
AUSTIN BUREAU

Two groups of Texas Republicans, split between the more mainstream and right-wing factions of the party, will host a dueling set of youth summits in the Houston area this fall.

The first, branded the "Texas Youth Summit," will take place in The Woodlands on Sept. 16 and 17 and feature a slate of conservative firebrands, such as U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz and U.S. Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene of



U.S. Reps. Dan Crenshaw and Marjorie Taylor Greene, who appeal to different GOP factions, have often feuded.

Georgia and Matt Gaetz of Florida.

The second, to be hosted Oct. 8 and 9 by U.S. Rep. Dan Crenshaw of Houston, offers a lineup

that includes Gov. Greg Abbott, former Wall Street tycoon Jordan Belfort and Seth Dillon, the CEO of the conservative satire site Babylon Bee.

The events highlight an ongoing battle within the Republican Party, which has already shifted significantly to the right under former President Donald Trump. While the two groups align on most major policy issues, the Greene contingent is known for spreading conspiracy theories and focusing on topics that animate the most devout Trump supporters, such as con-

troversial social issues and false claims of widespread election fraud.

The September event was organized by Christian Collins, a right-wing political operative who has been holding an annual youth summit since 2019.

"Our intent is to bring in the most conservative speakers throughout the country, as well as some of the faith-based folks that can (reach) young people and equip them with the conservative values, Judeo-Christian values, that this country was founded on," Collins said in an

interview.

Collins said he views his youth summit as more "America First" than the one hosted by Crenshaw, whose "philosophy is more like that of a George Bush or a John McCain," he said.

Still, Collins offered kudos to Crenshaw for landing speakers like Dillon and conservative radio host Dennis Prager.

"He's got some great speakers at his event that I would love to have at mine, eventually," Collins said.

Collins, who made an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018, said he was not running for office in 2022.

Summits continues on A4