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Westchester brings back 4 top administrators

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With so many county workers saying "sayonara" and taking their years of experience with them, Westchester government has come up short and wants to hire several administrators back — as consultants.

But some union leaders charge that is the wrong message to send workers whose jobs are threatened.

County Executive Rob Astorino is contracting with two former senior officials, and the Board of Legislators is hiring two others, even as hundreds of workers leave because of a county buyout or state retirement incentive.

The administration is giving Kevin Mahon, former commissioner of the Department of Social Services, a \$14,400 contract for eight weeks (\$4,952 paid for by the county with the rest covered by state and federal dollars).

And it is rehiring Deputy Budget Director Arthur Vietro part time at \$75 an hour, capped at \$30,000.

The county board, meanwhile, gave its longtime budget director, Robert Boland, a contract and is working on one with former Chief Deputy County Attorney Stacey Dolgin-Kmetz to be its legal counsel — each for \$20,000.

"When you have the entire top level of managers leaving at once, it's not a good place to be," said board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers. "Having that level of expertise is essential. ... Buying that level of expertise that you can shed at a moment's notice is just a smart thing to do."

All of the new consultants had retired in recent months, and each can earn up to \$30,000 a year under state law.

But the moves are disrespectful to the remaining workers who are facing layoffs, said Karen Pecora, president of Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, the county's largest union, representing 4,000 county workers.

"He's talking about laying off 900 people while you're bringing back (others)," she said. "Our members feel like they're being slapped in the face. This money could be used to save jobs."

Pecora said there are competent people remaining who could handle those responsibilities.

The board recently approved four ethics code waivers, which are necessary for signing any agreements with former employees, since the county has a one-year restriction on rehiring employees.

So far, 132 workers have taken a county buyout that paid \$1,000 for every year served, capped at \$30,000.

An additional 303 have filed paperwork to accept the state's retirement incentive.

Mahon and Vietro are expected to help preserve "continuity" in their respective areas — social services and budget — as the county retools its staffing and addresses a large looming deficit, said Ned McCormack, communications director and senior adviser.

Mahon will work with his replacement, Commissioner Grant Mitchell, while Vietro will focus on the budget.

In bringing them back, the county "gets the best of both worlds," McCormack said, by using their experience and shrinking the work force. It's simply a cost of doing business and still a significant savings, he said.

"It's like any operation, people come and people go. We've still got to maintain services for people," McCormack said.

"This is an opportunity to redraw the operational backbone of various departments. What we have to do is relook at the services that are available," he said.

State law allows retirees — those collecting a pension — to earn up to \$30,000, unless they receive a so-called 211 waiver, which would permit them to earn more.

There are no income restrictions for retirees over the age of 65, according to the state Comptroller's Office.

Because each of the contracts is below \$30,000, no waivers have been sought.

The board's and executive's actions follow a series of state and county departure incentives that are expected to reduce the size of the county work force.

The state's incentive, which has two parts, allows employees to retire without penalty at age 55 with a minimum of 25 years of service, or receive an additional month of pension credit, capped at 36 months, for each year of service.

In addition to the county buyout, the county's executive and legislative branches this year capped the amount of accumulated sick and vacation time that workers can receive, which in some cases translates to tens of thousands of dollars.

Workers leaving or retiring by July 1 didn't forfeit dollars from unused sick and vacation time that had accumulated over the years.

Combined, the incentives encouraged hundreds of workers, many with decades of experience, to leave their posts.

"This is a dynamic organization with a deep bench," McCormack said of the county's work force. "Turnover is a healthy thing."
