

State budget: 2019 funding, pay increases safe in Virginia spending plan



By **Travis Fain**
tfain@dailypress.com

SHARE THIS



A quick run through the legislature's rewrite of the Virginia state budget

FEBRUARY 23, 2017, 8:22 PM | RICHMOND

Virginia legislators are set to approve a \$107 billion budget Friday evening as the 2017 legislative session heads toward the finish line.

The two-year spending plan includes major raises for state police, a 3 percent increase for state employees, the state's portion of a 2 percent bump for public school teachers, raises for sheriff's deputies and university faculty as well as extra bumps for people in hard-to-fill positions, including nurses and other positions at Eastern State Hospital and other state facilities.

A positive swing in revenue collections, after a downturn led to cuts just months ago, fueled the change in fortunes. Gov. **Terry McAuliffe** dubbed himself "very happy" Thursday with the plan that emerged from House and Senate budget negotiations, though he didn't get everything he wanted.

For example: Legislators replaced full funding for the 2019 Commemoration at Jamestown, a \$10 million-plus series of events marking various 400-year anniversaries at the colony, including the first meeting of the **Virginia House** of Burgesses. The budget also restores staffing and marketing money that McAuliffe had cut at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. There's also new language to exempt the commemoration from state purchasing rules.

McAuliffe wanted commemoration funding chopped in half and to put much of the extra money toward mental health programs in jails. Since revenues are on pace to exceed what's called for in this budget, McAuliffe said he may direct leftover money to the jails.

He'll also have a chance to offer budget amendments the legislature can consider.

Local legislators were glad to see \$175,000 for the Denbigh High School Aviation Academy survive budget negotiations. A new funding boost for the SPARK program for at-risk youth in Newport News didn't come through, but legislators said they'll try again next year.

Though Republican budget writers didn't fund all of McAuliffe's mental health programs, they did put \$4.9 million toward a housing program the governor didn't fund in his own proposal. The idea is to free up hospital bed space by providing rent subsidies and in-home therapy for people with mental illnesses.

The budget also orders state departments to develop a new strategy for housing people with mental illnesses, as well as a breakdown of what it would cost to provide mental health assessments from qualified professionals within 72 hours of people being booked in Virginia jails.

Legislators left \$100,000 in the budget for the Board of Corrections to increase its oversight at regional jails, which was half of what McAuliffe wanted. Separate legislation to have the board work with the Office of the State Inspector General to review jail deaths is working its way through the General Assembly after much back and forth over how to handle these investigations.

The budget would block, for the third year in a row, the **Medicaid** expansion McAuliffe has pushed for. It would add 144 ID/DD waiver slots and expand the Governor's Access Plan, which provides primary care and drug benefits to people with serious mental illness, to 100 percent of the federal poverty level.

The GAP program has been capped at people making 80 percent of the federal poverty level. With the increase, it will cover 3,000 people.

The GOP majority cut \$6 million McAuliffe wanted to provide free IUDs and other long-acting reversible contraceptives to women. The federally funded project would have been designed after a program in Colorado credited with lowering teenage pregnancy and abortion rates.

Legislators also cut \$17 million in the Medicaid budget that had been set aside for overtime payments to personal assistance respite and companion services. The new budget language forbids overtime, which was set for a phase-in come July 1.

There's a \$6.5 million increase in state payments to nursing homes.

Republican budget writers also cut, here and there, some of the governor's job development grant programs. They restored funding for GO Virginia, a new jobs grant program directed in part by appointed regional boards. They cut cybersecurity camps that the governor had hoped to grow, as well as more than half the new money he wanted to increase the number of Virginia Occupational Safety and Health inspectors.

The legislature added about \$18 million more than McAuliffe requested for K-12 schools, according to

Speaker of the House William Howell's office, including \$7.3 million earmarked for smaller school systems that have lost students in recent years. Otherwise these systems would be due cuts under the state's per-pupil funding formula.

The budget also includes:

- language that would allow Christopher Newport University to keep the proceeds from selling Yoder Barn, **something the university has been seeking for some time.**
- \$1.5 million in new state funding for domestic violence programs, which will allow the state to draw down an additional \$6 million in federal funding, according to the speaker's office.
- a study by the state Supreme Court's Office of the Executive Secretary on the use of community service instead of fines in criminal cases, as well as on the impact of a new court rule requiring more community service options. Legislators have been struggling this session with what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Virginians who have lost their driver's licenses **due to an automatic revocation policy tied to non-payment of court fines.**
- \$200,000 for a compensation study to look at state employee pay, as well as retirement benefits.
- a requirement that the attorney general report to the General Assembly on salary increases in his agency over the last two years. This follows **a report that attorneys were given large raises** funded by asset forfeiture revenue while other state employees saw their salaries stay relatively flat.
- \$1.5 million to compensate Keith Allen Harward, who was wrongly convicted of a Newport News murder and served 33 years in prison. **He was exonerated last year** by DNA evidence and released.
- \$1.35 million to measure land subsidence as part of **a long-term plan to inject treated wastewater into the ground in Hampton Roads** in order to slow or stop subsidence.
- \$10 million to expand the Albert G. Horton Memorial Veterans Cemetery in Suffolk.
- the elimination of a small increase McAuliffe had proposed in restaurant inspection fees.
- \$2.8 million to restore an inflation adjustment for the **Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters.**
- \$380,000 to fund administration of a new private school voucher program approved by the legislature. The money will go away if McAuliffe vetoes this program, as expected.
- a \$104.7 million cut that delays construction of a massive new Richmond warehouse for the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control.

- \$282,000 to fund new welfare fraud check programs. The legislature approved legislation this session to crack down on people who lose at least four EBT cards in a year and to run recipient names against lists of lottery winners. **Other proposed welfare reforms fell by the wayside.**

- a new program to monitor local government finances for signs of distress. The program follows concerns over Petersburg's finances.

- a half cut for Project Graduation funding. The program is being phased out.

- an extra \$125,000, for a total of \$492,638, to pay for the inauguration of a new governor after the 2017 elections.

Fain can be reached by phone at 757-525-1759.

Copyright © 2017, Daily Press

This article is related to: [Colleges and Universities](#), [Job Layoffs](#), [Terry McAuliffe](#), [Unemployment and Layoffs](#), [Virginia General Assembly](#), [Medicaid](#), [Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters](#)