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Northrop Grumman lays off 51 state workers under contract with VITA

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BY MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch

Northrop Grumman today laid off 51 state employees who have been managed by Northrop Grumman under a \$2.3 billion contract with the Virginia Information Technologies Agency.

Some of the affected employees work at the Commonwealth Enterprise Solutions Center in Chester that Northrop Grumman built under the original 10-year contract it signed with the state in 2006 to manage Virginia government information systems. Others work in locations across Virginia.

"This was not a VITA decision," said VITA spokeswoman Marcella Williamson in an email today. "This was a Northrop



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Grumman business decision."

Williamson said the layoffs resulted from a recent review by Northrop Grumman of "the staffing levels and skills required to most effectively support the commonwealth."

"VITA does not expect a drop in service from Northrop Grumman" as a consequence of the layoffs, Williamson said in a written statement today in

response to an inquiry by the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

"Northrop Grumman has service level agreements for the (information technology) infrastructure it provides," she said. "VITA expects Northrop Grumman to continue to provide the services meeting those...agreements so that state agencies can continue to serve the commonwealth."

The decision did not sit well with the association that represents the state's work force.

"We are deeply disappointed by this action which caused 51 state employees to lose their jobs," said Johnna Cossaboon, communications director for the Virginia Governmental Employees Association.

"The commonwealth's outsourcing of information technology to a private vendor has been plagued by problems since its beginning," Cossaboon said in a statement today.

"Today's move further illustrates that outsourcing companies like Northrop Grumman are more committed to increasing profits than to delivering quality services to the agencies and the citizens of the commonwealth."

Cossaboon said the association would work with the General Assembly and the administration of Gov. Terry McAuliffe "to ensure that these employees receive all the benefits they are entitled to under the State Workforce Transition Act."

McAuliffe, who is visiting Europe on a trade mission, had no comment on the company's action, but spokesman Brian Coy said the company made the administration aware of the decision prior to its announcement.

However, key legislators said they were blindsided, even though they are overseeing a working group examining options on the future of the Northrop Grumman contract.

"I'm shocked that we weren't notified," said House Appropriations Chairman S. Chris Jones, R-Suffolk, whose committee staff is participating in the working group.

Sen. John Watkins, R-Powhatan, chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, which received an update on the status of the contract last week, said he learned of the decision from news reports.

Then-Gov. Bob McDonnell agreed in 2010 to a three-year extension of the contract with Northrop Grumman to mid-2019, when the state must either renew, rebid, or disentangle itself from the commitment.

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Those options, now under intensive examination by state officials and an outside consultant, could require Virginia to decide whether to buy the Chester center, valued at \$40 million, and other assets owned by Northrop Grumman.

The state also would have to decide whether it would hire back more than 500 state employees who transferred to Northrop Grumman employment under the contract.

The employees laid off today were those who chose to remain with the state, Williamson said. "Under their contract, their work is managed by Northrop Grumman, they are paid by the state, and Northrop Grumman reimburses the state for their salaries and benefits."

While Northrop Grumman made the decision, VITA informed the affected workers because they are state employees and placed them on leave through June 30.

They will be offered state severance packages based on their years of service, early retirement options, and "access to outplacement services."

"Such workforce reductions are difficult on those involved, and we are optimistic that those who want employment will find new employment quickly," Williamson said.

VITA has had a troubled history since its creation in 2005 under then-Gov. Mark R. Warner, now a U.S. senator for Virginia. The program has been plagued at times by rocky relationships and spotty service, which reached a nadir in August 2010, when a computer meltdown affected 26 of 89 executive branch agencies.

VITA is responsible for almost 60,000 personal computers and mailboxes, more than 3,300 computer servers, two data centers, and 72,000 phones and other telecommunication devices.

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