

State legislators to get full-time paid staff

JUNEAU (AP) — House and Senate leaders have reached agreement on a plan calling for Alaska's 60 legislators to have state-paid year-round staffs for the first time.

The proposal calls for the hiring of 102 permanent employees, in addition to the temporary aides hired for the session. The plan means the state would be required to pay for office space in each lawmaker's hometown during the time when the Legislature is not in session.

Members of the three-party coalition ruling the House caucused on the plan over the weekend, and Rules Chairman Jack Fuller, D-Nome, said legislators endorsed it.

Senate Rules Chairman Tim Kelly, R-Anchorage, said Senate leaders also have endorsed the plan.

The proposal is the outgrowth of several months of negotiations between the House and Senate, and reflects a trend begun just a few years ago, when all 60 legislators were allotted funds for the first time to hire staffs during the session.

Kelly, who has worked for several months on the staffing plan, acknowledged it amounts to an increase in staffing. But

he said the intent is to get away from the past practice of lawmakers hiring staffers or consultants on contract during the interim.

"We're trying to get away from abuses during the interim. What we essentially want to do is stop the hypocrisy that's been going on for years . . . and admit we need permanent staff. A few people have gotten a whole lot (of staff) during past years, while others have gotten nothing.

Here are the basics of the staffing plan:

- Each legislator would get a permanent, year-round secretary, to be paid \$25,620 per year plus additional money for prior experience. The presiding officers of each house and the minority and majority leaders would be allowed a second permanent secretary.

- All committee chairmen, both presiding officers, and the majority and minority leaders in both chambers would be authorized a permanent professional assistant, to be paid \$39,160 per year, plus additional pay for prior legislative experience.

- In addition, the Senate and House each would have

four permanent professional assistant positions to be assigned where needed.

- During the session, additional temporary staffers would be hired, but the plan does not specify how many. Beginning next session, temporary staffers would receive full medical benefits.

- All temporary session employees on the payroll now would receive a pay raise retroactive to April 16.

While the staffing plan calls for pay levels to be increased for most legislative employees, the top position of professional assistant would be paid \$39,120 per year, which is slightly less than the current top position — administrative assistant — which pays \$42,500.

Kelly said the cost of hiring 102 permanent staffers, pegged at \$3.5 million per year, should result in a reduction in the amount of money spent during the interim.