



Gov. Abbott Announces New Senior Staff

Description

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Gov. Greg Abbott is making major changes in his office after his first two regular sessions — and a special session — bringing in several new senior staffers with deep legislative experience, according to aides.

Daniel Hodge, Abbott's chief of staff, is departing after holding the top job since the governor took office in 2015. Hodge, who's worked for Abbott since his 2002 campaign for attorney general, is being replaced by Luis Saenz, Abbott's former appointments director in the governor's office.

Other new additions include Tommy Williams, currently the vice chancellor for federal and state relations at the Texas A&M University System. Williams, a former Republican state senator from The Woodlands who chaired the Finance Committee, is joining Abbott's office as senior adviser for fiscal affairs. Sarah Hicks, who was Finance Committee director under Williams and now works with him at A&M, is becoming Abbott's budget director.

John Colyandro, who has previously served as a policy adviser to Abbott, is

formally rejoining his circle as a senior adviser and policy director in the governor's office. Former Senate Parliamentarian Walter Fisher is becoming Abbott's legislative director, while Peggy Venable, currently a senior visiting fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, is taking over as appointments director.

Also, some current staffers are seeing promotions. Reed Clay, Abbott's deputy chief of staff, is becoming the office's chief operating officer. Steven Albright, Abbott's budget director, is moving up to be the governor's senior adviser for state operations. Communications Director Matt Hirsch will continue to hold that title but also is getting a new one: deputy chief of staff.

As part of the office overhaul, some staffers — in addition to Hodge — are leaving their current jobs. Some of those departing the office will maintain close ties to the administration, while others will play roles elsewhere within Abbott's orbit, according to his office.

Abbott aides are describing the staffing changes as a natural transition at this point in the governor's tenure: He has completed the two regular legislative sessions that make up his first term, as well as a special session that ended last month. He is also preparing for a likely second term — he is up for re-election next year but has not drawn any serious challengers, Democratic or Republican.

Taken together, the new hires dramatically increase the legislative bona fides in Abbott's office — something that has been lacking compared with past governors' staffs. The new additions also come after a series of sessions where Abbott, formerly the longtime attorney general, faced some criticism for his handle on the legislative process.

The staff changes are taking effect Oct. 1. Abbott made them official at a news conference Monday afternoon.

“For the new team, our immediate focus will remain the same as it has been in my current team, and that is to continue the recovery and rebuilding process following Hurricane Harvey,” said Abbott, flanked by the incoming

staffers. “But as we go forward, there are also some big ideas that I plan to tackle in the upcoming session, and this team will played a pivotal role in spearheading those efforts.”Abbott declined to go into detail on the initiatives he has planned for the next session. He told reporters they will hear more about them as the Harvey recovery progresses and the 2019 session gets closer.

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