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# The advantage of public service

**16 percent of public employees earn more than \$100,000 a year. Is it overtime ALL the time?**

**By Mike Trask and Jeff German**

Las Vegas Sun

**[\\$100,000-plus club](#)**

Clark County Manager Virginia Valentine is the county's highest-ranking employee, but she is far from being the county's highest-paid employee.

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That distinction belongs to Carl Nelson, a 30-year emergency medical services supervisor who, thanks to 2,400 hours of overtime, last year earned \$232,791, well above Valentine's \$180,692.

At the Metro Police Department, corrections officer Cecil Dyer was the top-paid employee in 2006, earning \$194,877, more than half of that - \$100,207 - from overtime. By contrast, then-Sheriff Bill Young, who as an elected official had his salary set by law, earned only \$134,263.

And in North Las Vegas, Corrections Lt. Robin Simpson's \$192,121 salary put him atop the city's pay pyramid, above the \$181,885 earned by City Manager Gregory Rose.

In a state known for being stingy with public dollars, a review by the Sun of government salaries in Southern Nevada has found that the percentage of public employees pulling down six-figure salaries is three times the 5 percent national average for all workers, public and private - even though that average includes major metropolitan areas with far higher costs of living.

In the Las Vegas Valley, 2,920 (15.7 percent) of 18,628 public employees earned more than \$100,000 in 2006, many with the help of massive amounts of taxpayer-funded overtime, the Sun found.

As the Clark County School District strains to persuade 2,000 to 3,000 teachers a year to move to Southern Nevada for \$33,000 starting salaries, tens of millions of dollars of taxpayer money is going to high overtime bills for jailers, firefighters and others.

Managers of the public agencies involved argue that they have little choice because someone has to work the necessary shifts.

But management experts told the Sun that many of those shifts could be covered for less money if funds now going to overtime were used instead to hire more workers - and pay them straight time instead of time and a half to double time.

"I'm stunned by those salaries," said Tanis Salant, a public administration professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "I've never heard of public safety line officers making so much money."

Critics said that in Clark County and most of its cities, the system seems to be operated largely for the benefit of the workers, allowing them to reap as much overtime as they want, even if it means draining public dollars that otherwise could be spent on unmet needs in the valley.

Rather than being used sparingly to cover staff shortages due to sickness or other factors, overtime has become a normal way of doing business that allows dozens of public workers to earn tens of thousands of extra dollars annually. Four Metro corrections officers, for example, each earned more than \$77,000 in overtime alone last year.

Moreover, the high salaries are not confined to top administrators or highly trained professionals. Public relations spokesmen for some cities and the county earn in the \$115,000 to \$120,000 range, a City Council liaison at Las Vegas City Hall was paid \$110,349, and an office manager in Henderson received \$100,065.

Roughly two-thirds of the region's six-figure employees are firefighters, corrections officers and police officers. Of the 1,639 firefighters in Clark County, Las Vegas, Henderson, North Las Vegas and Boulder City, 925 (56.4 percent) earned more than \$100,000 last year.

The records also show that 1,050 (26.8 percent) of the region's 3,912 police and corrections officers are members of the \$100,000-plus club.

That places them two to four times beyond the median household income in the Las Vegas area - \$47,320, according to the 2006 Las Vegas Perspective, a Nevada Development Authority publication.

The relatively large number of high public salaries raises several important policy questions.

While competitive salaries are needed to attract and retain top-quality workers who in some cases could earn more in the private sector, fire and police jobs are not commonly regarded as six-figure income career paths - and in the vast majority of U.S. cities, they are not.

Yet in Southern Nevada, nearly 2,000 firefighters, police officers and corrections officers last year earned more than \$100,000 - many of them much more - making the local jobs among the best-paying of their kind in the nation.

The high salaries - substantially higher and more numerous than those in comparably sized cities elsewhere - also siphon off limited public dollars that otherwise could be used to improve the modest pay of other public workers or targeted at the array of problems facing local municipalities.

That issue is particularly relevant in Nevada, which ranked 47th nationally in overall per capita government spending in a 2005 study by Governing magazine, a trade publication for local governments. In other words, not only does Nevada spend less on public services than all but three other states, but it also devotes a sizable chunk of those dollars to workers' salaries, instead of programs.

Like much else in the debate over whether the high salaries are justified, the manner in which overtime has become the rule, not the exception - in many cases, increasing workers' base pay by 25 percent to 50 percent - spawns widely divergent interpretations. Is that proof, as some argue, of committed workers making personal sacrifices for the public good, or, as others contend, evidence of a broken, poorly managed system being milked from top to bottom?

Not surprisingly, municipal and union leaders defend the high salaries, saying local governments usually

are short-staffed and are forced to pay overtime to maintain a high level of public safety.

Chris Collins, executive director of the Las Vegas Police Protective Association, which represents Metro officers, said cops give up a lot in their personal lives to work overtime.

"They do put their lives on the line, and they deserve what they make," Collins said. "And there's a lot of sacrifice that comes with that. People who work overtime are missing birthday parties or a Thanksgiving. A lot of times it's the families who suffer."

Ryan Beaman, president of Clark County Firefighters Local 1908, agreed.

"Overtime is not a benefit for firefighters," said Beaman, a fire engineer with the county fire department. "They are spending a large amount of time away from their families and are exposed to danger. It is phenomenal that they're stepping up and working with this large amount of hours for the community."

Understaffing is the chief reason for his department's overtime, Beaman said.

"We just can't keep up with growth in the valley," he said. "We are staffed at a bare minimum. Our guys are stretched out all over the place."

But experts in public policy and management said the high government salaries - in particular, for public safety workers - appear out of sync with the rest of the country.

"A county executive is going to be making more than \$100,000," said Jerry Newman, a professor in the School of Management at the University at Buffalo who co-authored the book "Compensation."

"But a \$100,000 salary is a relatively rare phenomenon, particularly in the public sector."

Pete Sepp of the National Taxpayers Union, a government watchdog group, said the large number of \$100,000-plus earners here suggests that local governments need to overhaul their systems.

"Even if it's overtime pushing up the salaries, it can't be healthy for taxpayers or the employees taking the overtime," Sepp said. "Nobody wants to underpay police and firemen, but it's hard to argue that when they are pulling in two times the average income."

That view is shared by Andrew Matthews, a spokesman for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, a conservative think tank in Las Vegas.

"Citizens who have a vested interest in the future of our state would be alarmed by those numbers," Matthews said. "We are headed in a dangerous direction."

State Sen. Bob Beers, a conservative Las Vegas Republican who last year pushed a failed ballot initiative aimed at restraining state government spending, said the salary picture "almost leaves the impression that the concept of public service has been bent into self-service."

Michael Shires, a public policy professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., said extensive use of overtime in public jobs, though not unique to Southern Nevada, often is seen as an abuse of public funding.

"(This) is very common, especially in places with heavily unionized public employees," Shires said.

"Generally what happens is that from a management perspective you don't want to hire new officers unless you feel you will have stability of funding to keep that officer for a long period of time."

Shires said it usually is cheaper for municipalities to pay overtime rather than hire new employees, thereby avoiding the cost of training and health, retirement and other benefits.

But the millions of dollars being spent now on overtime easily could be used to hire dozens of new public employees, bringing the twin benefits of additional staffing and more rested workers. For example, in Metro, where the starting salary is \$46,030, the department's top four overtime earners alone received a total of \$346,686 in extra pay last year. Overall, the department spent \$17.8 million on overtime in 2006, \$4 million of which was reimbursed by special event organizers.

Matthew Drennan, an urban planning professor at UCLA, said overtime can be abused when the managers who control it also are union members. Shift supervisors are unionized at Metro Police and other police departments in Southern Nevada.

"It's ripping off the taxpayers," he said. "People deciding overtime should be managers who are not part of the union. The managers need to be held accountable for running over budget."

Because many public employees' retirement benefits are based on their total compensation in their three highest paid years of employment, overtime can significantly boost their monthly pensions - and generate millions of dollars in future public expenses.

"People close to retirement have been known to get as much overtime as possible," Drennan said.

Dana Bilyeu, executive officer of the Nevada Public Retirement System, the pension plan that covers Metro Police, Clark County firefighters and dozens of other public agencies, said some overtime - primarily "call back" pay for nonscheduled additional work hours - figures into retirement benefits here.

Here is a government-by-government look at the pay issue:

### **Clark County**

- Of the 7,255 full-time employees in Clark County, 806 (11.1 percent) earned more than \$100,000 last year. That includes 410 firefighters, captains and battalion chiefs, about 65 percent of the department. Twenty-one firefighters made more last year than County Manager Valentine.

Those numbers, Valentine said, are "higher than I expected."

"We're always concerned about managing our overtime," she said. "I think it does compensate some individuals very highly. It also is an incentive for people to come into the department."

Indeed, though other top local officials lament the challenge of finding new hires, Valentine said: "We have no shortage of applications."

Steven Ratigan, a senior deputy fire chief who is No. 28 on the county's list of the well-paid, earning \$179,423 last year, acknowledged that the high salaries might not sit well with taxpayers.

"They have a legitimate concern," he said. "I would be concerned. But the trade-off for these dollars are hours for these folks. They are out there."

"Our mission is to maintain current service levels. We can't shut down equipment when people are sick or on vacation."

In the case of EMS supervisor Nelson, his 2,400 hours of overtime were necessary, Ratigan said, because the county was short one of its two EMS supervisors.

"This gentleman has missed holidays, birthdays and anniversaries," he said. True enough, but he also was very well compensated for doing so.

While Nelson's \$232,791 paycheck was the top salary in county government in 2006, even that lofty figure was not the overall highest compensation among Clark County workers. When he retired last year, Fire Capt. Buddy Manwill walked away with \$448,650 in salary and unused vacation and sick time.

### **City of Las Vegas**

- In the city of Las Vegas, 577 (20.3 percent) of 2,848 full-time employees earned more than \$100,000 last year, the records show. That includes 347 firefighters, more than half - 51.3 percent - of the department.

In contrast, Tucson, comparable in size to Las Vegas, last year had only 74 (1.3 percent) of 5,910 public employees earning more than \$100,000. And in Oklahoma City, another city about the size of Las Vegas, 95 (2.2 percent) of 4,387 employees made more than \$100,000.

Mark Vincent, Las Vegas' finance director, said that although some local salaries might appear excessive, overtime is seen within government as a bargain for taxpayers.

"The general rule of thumb is that paying overtime is cheaper than hiring another body," he said. "Our fire department attempts to limit an amount a firefighter works to ensure that he is not too tired. Controls are in place."

At the same time, Vincent said he understands that the public might question some of the higher salaries.

"It is an emotional thing to look at and say some of these people made so much," he said. "But they were actually paid for extra hours they worked. A lot of firemen are single, without family and in the fire station all the time."

### **Metro Police**

- At Metro Police, records show that 872 (18.3 percent) of 4,755 full-time employees made more than \$100,000 last year. That includes 815 police and corrections officers and administrators.

Of those paid more than \$100,000, 27 corrections officers and six police officers did so with the help of more than \$40,000 in overtime pay.

Sheriff Doug Gillespie said two of the police officers, homicide Lt. Lew Roberts and fatal traffic Sgt. Tracy McDonald, both earned the majority of their overtime, \$46,425 and \$60,665 respectively, working necessary call-back hours.

Though Dyer topped Metro's overtime list with \$100,207, fellow corrections officer Michael Dryden

was right behind him, taking in \$91,344 in overtime pay beyond his regular salary of \$83,717. Corrections officer Valyon Goins supplemented his \$87,653 base pay with \$78,114 in overtime, and corrections officer Ping Wu made \$77,022 on top of his \$83,385 salary.

Gillespie, who has taken a \$55,000 pay cut with his new \$134,263 legislative-mandated salary as sheriff, defended the overtime accumulated by corrections officers, saying the extra hours were needed to maintain the overflowing and understaffed Clark County Detention Center.

"We're down a significant number of people at the jail, and we're in the process of hiring people to correct that," he said.

All overtime at the detention center is assigned on a volunteer basis, he said.

Gillespie explained that the money allocated for overtime is part of the department's approved budget and is monitored closely at Metro.

"From my standpoint, I think the public understands the difficult job that police officers have," Gillespie said. "In people's time of need, they call us."

Gillespie and union leaders also point out that a significant portion of police officers' overtime comes from performing off-duty security at special events where the overtime is paid by the event promoters, not taxpayers.

More than three-quarters of the \$17.8 million in overtime that Metro paid last year, however, was taxpayer money.

## **Henderson**

- In Henderson, 408 of 1,760 full-time public employees (23.2 percent) made more than \$100,000 last year, including a whopping 74.7 percent of the fire department - 121 of 162 firefighters. Another 103 police and corrections officers, 27.8 percent of the department, also crossed the \$100,000 threshold.

Glendale, Ariz., a fast-growing city similar in size to 250,000-population Henderson, had only 53 of 1,874 workers (2.8 percent) making more than \$100,000 last year.

Fire Capt. Woodroe Dunn, whose \$213,358 salary last year ranked No. 2 behind City Manager Philip Speight, got \$98,912 of that through overtime.

Henderson Fire Chief Jim Cavalieri described the circumstances surrounding Dunn's overtime as an "anomaly" in the department.

"His children have all left the home, and he's available to fill a void when other people aren't," Cavalieri said.

The lure of time and a half, though, produced no shortage of people willing to fill those voids.

Ninety-nine other \$100,000-plus fire department employees in Henderson earned more than \$25,000 in overtime last year, including 15 who topped \$50,000 in overtime.

The department, Cavalieri said, is taking steps to reduce the number of hours firefighters work.

"We hired six extra people," he said. "We don't want to see our employees working unusually high numbers of hours or making horrendously high salaries."

### **Boulder City**

- In terms of the percentage of the public workforce earning more than \$100,000, Boulder City was the most frugal local government. Only 10 of its 177 full-time employees (5.6 percent) made that much, led by City Manager Vicki Mayes' \$139,958 salary.

### **North Las Vegas**

- In North Las Vegas, 247 (13.5 percent) of 1,833 full-time employees made more than \$100,000 last year. That includes 131 (33.5 percent) of 391 police and corrections officers and 46 (31.3 percent) of 147 firefighters.

By contrast, in Chandler, Ariz., a city similar in size to North Las Vegas, only 93 (6 percent) of 1,552 public employees earned more than \$100,000 last year.

North Las Vegas Corrections Lt. Robin Simpson, with his list-topping \$192,121 salary, isn't the only jailer making big bucks via overtime pay. Three other corrections officers each made at least \$162,000 - more than any other North Las Vegas city employee except for City Manager Rose.

City and police officials blame the overtime on court-mandated staffing levels at the jail, a shortage of officers and the city's rapid growth.

"We like people who like overtime because they take the burden off someone who may have family obligations," said Tim Bedwell, a spokesman for the North Las Vegas Police Department.

Rose said the overtime underlines the city's commitment to public safety.

"You can't have quality growth unless residents feel safe," he said. "Our preference would be for the individuals to never have to work overtime. But we can't do that because we don't have the staff to do it."

Bret Jacobson, a senior analyst for the Center for Union Facts, a conservative watchdog group in Washington, said the extensive use of overtime suggests that local governments ought to search for alternatives and management efficiencies.

"It's a nationwide problem," Jacobson said. "But these numbers are pretty shocking."

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**CLARK COUNTY FIRE DEPT. PARAMEDIC**  
CARL NELSON, EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES SUPERVISOR  
**\$232,791**  
(2,400 HOURS OF OVERTIME)

**METRO POLICE DEPT. CORRECTIONS OFFICER CEGLDYER**  
**\$194,877**  
(\$100,207 IN OVERTIME PAY)

**METROPOLITAN POLICE**

**LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE**  
LAS VEGAS FIRE BATTALION CHIEF HENRY CLINTON  
**\$199,020**  
(BASE SALARY WAS \$104,346)

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