

# Head of human services agency to step down

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PROVIDENCE — Ronald A. Lebel announced yesterday that he would retire at the end of the year from his job as director of the state Department of Human Services.

Lebel, 56, has led the department since August 2003, when he took over as acting director. He was confirmed by the Senate as permanent director in April.

"Ron Lebel has been a terrific public servant," Governor Carcieri said in a statement. "Ron has been on the front lines of Rhode Island's efforts to develop an effective safety net for our most vulnerable citizens."

Carcieri praised Lebel for his "compassion and ability" and said that "there is no doubt that Ron's experience, expertise and passion will be missed."

Lebel plans to practice law in his hometown of Portsmouth.

"This will not be 'retirement.' Rather, it will be a new beginning, for my family and me," he said in a statement.

In a phone interview later, Lebel added: "I'm not the type of person that's going to stop working. I think this is a more appropriate time to begin building my next career outside state government, while I'm younger."

On Oct. 22, Lebel marked 28 years of state service, allowing him to retire now with a pension equal to 60 percent of the average of his three highest years' pay. He currently makes \$134,288 a year.

"I would like to thank Governor Carcieri for his trust and confidence in appointing me to be the director of the Department of Human Services and for his support and guidance throughout my tenure in dealing with the many challenging human service fiscal and policy issues of our time," Lebel said.

Carcieri does not yet have a replacement lined up to fill the cabinet-level position. Lebel's retirement comes just as Carcieri is about to start his second and

final term as governor. His office yesterday said there are no other known department changes at this time. Lebel's last day of work will be Dec. 22.

Human Services is the state's largest department and oversees the Family Independence Program, Rhode Island's version of welfare, as well as RIte Care, the state's health-insurance program for the poor. It also has a hand in dealing with foster children and the state's elderly and disabled, military veterans and hospitals. It has an annual budget of \$1.7 billion and the director oversees more than 1,100 employees.

Joanne McGunagle, executive director of the Comprehensive Community Action Program, said yesterday: "Most nonprofit social service agencies in the state have felt that Ron has been a true advocate for the less advantaged in the state and has partnered with us to really be able to deliver the most services in the most effective and efficient ways."

Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport said it has been "my privilege to work with Ron Lebel."

"He has demonstrated a commitment to caring and advocating for those less fortunate in society during some of the most difficult budgets that we have faced as a state," she said in a statement.

Lebel started working for the state in 1978, when he became special counsel to the director of the Department of Business Regulation. He joined the Department of Human Services later that year as legal counsel. He was named associate director for management services in 1997. Lebel took over the department when Carcieri named Jane Hayward, the previous director, to head the new state Office of Health and Human Services, which oversees the Department of Human Services and four other state departments.

Lebel has also done a small amount of work on the side as an attorney and accountant providing legal accounting and tax preparation to individuals and small businesses.

He holds a bachelor's degree in government from Colby College and a law degree from Suffolk University. He is a certified public accountant and a member of the Rhode Island Bar Association.

Human services is one of the fastest growing parts of state government and has been a frequent target of Carcieri during his four years in office. Carcieri has tried

year after year to cut entitlements to people on welfare and those receiving state subsidized health care.

Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, called Lebel's position "one of the most challenging jobs in state government."

"While we haven't always agreed with the positions that the department has taken, Ron has always been open to community input," Brewster said. "We expect as the governor searches for a replacement he will search for someone with experience in working with the broad range of needs of the population served by DHS and someone who has experience delivering quality services in a fiscally efficient manner."

Lt. Gov.-elect Elizabeth H. Roberts worked with Lebel when she headed the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services and had praise for him yesterday.

"That is a department that is run very well and is recognized nationally for leadership on programs like RIte Care," Roberts said. "I think the governor now faces a real challenge, as governors do across the country, dealing with Medicaid and I'm very hopeful that the governor and the secretary for health and human services will look for someone with some vision to change the direction of that program to meet the financial challenges it's facing while still caring for the most vulnerable."