

LEAVITT RETURNS CHIEF OF STAFF TO FORMER POST; WORKFORCE SERVICES NEED FOR STRONG LEADERSHIP

Holly Mullen

The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: January 6, 1998. pg. B2

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Saying he was unable to find the "right fit" among a pool of candidates to lead the state's Department of Workforce Services, Gov. Mike Leavitt announced Monday that Chief of Staff Robert Gross will return to his former post of executive director of the department.

Robert Linnell, Leavitt's deputy for intergovernmental relations, will become acting chief of staff. The changes were effective immediately.

Although the governor's office has interviewed "three or four individuals" since Gross left the post in August, none have the combined public and private sector experience required for the job, said Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela.

"We knew we needed someone with private sector experience, and the governor felt it was critical before we went into the Legislature to have a permanent director," Varela said.

The director's job has been difficult to fill, Varela said, because it requires the solid business experience of a chief executive officer combined with knowledge of the welfare system and the workings of federal grants.

Beyond that, the director needs to "know how to help people who need help," Varela said. Leavitt appeared before workforce services employees for the announcement. He lauded Gross, 47, for his "flexibility and willingness to serve where he is needed most.

"While interim director Curtis Johnson has done a wonderful job keeping the department moving forward, since Bob Gross left the position to join my personal staff in August we have not found the right candidate with the necessary private sector experience to continue the momentum."

Gross, a former president of First Interstate Bank, became Leavitt's chief of staff in August after serving a little over a year as director of Workforce Services.

Gross, who generally is held in high regard by the department's employees, said he looked forward to resuming his old job.

"We are well on our way to making Utah a national model for welfare reform and workforce services," Gross said.

Leavitt created Workforce Services in July 1996 by combining the roles of job services, aid to families with dependent children and other smaller aid programs formerly administered through the state Department of Human Services. The department's purpose is to provide temporary financial assistance for needy families while offering a job training program.

Linnell, 65, will serve as chief of staff through March, when he is scheduled to leave for an mission to Ghana for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Varela will remain as deputy chief of staff and Leavitt's communications director.