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Millions more for Senate

Democrats campaigned on personnel cuts, but spending rises after summer of turmoil

By **IRENE JAY LIU**, Capitol bureau

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ALBANY -- Senate Democrats campaigned on a pledge to make large cuts in personnel costs, but since taking the majority the chamber is now poised to spend millions more than ever before on its staff.

From the beginning of April through mid-August of this year, the Senate spent \$29.2 million on staff, roughly \$1.6 million more than the GOP-controlled Senate spent during the same period in 2008, according to records from the state Comptroller's office.

Senate Democrats contend roughly \$1.2 million were costs associated with the staffing transition, which was delayed last winter after four renegade Democrats withheld the support for Malcolm Smith as Senate leader, prompting an agreement between the Democrats and Republicans to hold off layoffs of GOP staff until April 1.

When 234 employees left around April 1, the additional lag payroll and vacation payments cost the Senate additional funds, said Austin Shafran, a Senate Democratic spokesman.

Shafran acknowledged \$400,000 in additional staffing spending, but said that "by the end of the year, on an annualized basis, Senate Democratic staff spending will be in line with the previous year."

The new budget breaks from an earlier pledge by Smith to shave the total Senate budget by eight to 10 percent, including a 15 percent cut to the Senate's central staff. Overall, the Senate has spent \$300,000 less than Republicans did during the same period, with the Senate's increased staff expenditures offset by reduced printing, postage and equipment costs.

In March, Democrats cut the minority staffing budget by about 9 percent -- Republicans received \$13.6 million in staffing resources, or \$1.6 million less than the Democrats did in the minority in 2008. At the time, Senate Democrats

explained the reduction was in line with the Senate Democrats' overall cost-cutting goal.

"We're asking everybody, including ourselves, to do a little more with a little less," said Shafran in March. "It's good budgeting."

But Republicans accused Democrats of breaking their promise to reform the chamber and in June, the GOP and two renegade Democrats, Sens. Pedro Espada and Hiram Monserrate, staged a leadership coup in the name of "reform," particularly the equitable allocation of resources.

After weeks of stalemate and the return of the turncoat senators to the Democratic conference, Democratic leaders agreed to a number of reforms, including more equitable distribution of staffing resources and discretionary grants, or pork.

In August, Democrats agreed to give the Republicans an additional \$13 million over the next 17 months -- \$3.8 million this year and \$9.2 million next year -- on top of their annual \$13.5 million allocation.

The funds will be taken from previous-year budget surpluses, and will not result in cuts to the Democratic staffing budget, the Senate Democrats said.

Senate Republicans have already begun to spend the additional funds, approving salary increases for over 50 staff. But most of the increases were partial reinstatements for employees that took pay cuts when the GOP lost the majority.

Since the Senate stalemate, Democrats have faced fierce scrutiny over staffing decisions, particularly for Espada, who rose to Senate majority leader as part of his deal to return to the Democrats on July 9.

Espada's son, Pedro G. Espada, was hired for a newly-created \$120,000 Senate job, but ultimately resigned the post amid intense media scrutiny.

In addition, the Senate has approved over \$500,000 in new staff and raises for Espada, who represents the Bronx.

In total, Democratic leaders have spent more than \$1 million in new staff and pay raises since the June 8 coup.