

House panel adopts 'hideous' \$1.2 billion cut in human services

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted May 11, 2011 @ 06:45 PM

SPRINGFIELD -- An Illinois House committee on Wednesday approved a human services budget for next year that even the committee chairman called "hideous."

The \$12 billion spending plan was approved by the House Human Services Appropriations Committee. The plan would stretch out payment of Medicaid bills to save money and cut public health grants across the board, but add funding for Circuit Breaker and Illinois Cares Rx.

It also spares the Illinois School for the Deaf and the Illinois School for the Visually Impaired, both in Jacksonville, from significant cuts. However, the committee will consider ways to shift some of the schools' costs.

A lengthy list of witnesses registered with the committee Wednesday, all of them opposed to the proposal. "We were given the absolutely breathtaking, stunning task to reduce the budget by \$1.2 billion," committee chairman Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, said. "It was a hideous task."

Feigenholtz said the committee had to cut 6.5 percent from the budget for each agency for which it has authority. That includes the departments of Human Services, Children and Family Services, Healthcare and Family Services, Public Health and Veteran's Affairs.

As much as possible, the committee targeted administrative costs. After that, the committee tried to preserve what members believe are "core" programs that keep people from falling "deeper into poverty, illness, hospitalization or any kind of more expensive, inappropriate care."

The budget would extend the payment cycle for Medicaid bills from 24 to 45 days, a \$500 million saving. It also would restore about \$50 million to Illinois Cares Rx, which provides prescription drug help, and \$24 million to the circuit breaker program, which provides property tax relief for seniors. Gov. Pat Quinn wanted to eliminate both programs.

The budgets for the schools for the deaf and visually impaired would be cut about 1 percent, Feigenholtz said, but she wants other areas of government to share the cost of running the schools.

"We have two schools that have the identical curriculum as any other school. Why don't we have a dime of local (school) money?" she said.

Like all of the budgets approved by House committees so far, the human services budget is at only the first step in the appropriations process.

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