

The News-Gazette

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House committee cuts \$1.2 billion from Quinn's human services budget

Wed, 05/11/2011 - 7:44pm | [Tom Kacich](#)

SPRINGFIELD — Gov. Pat Quinn's budget for human services underwent a major rewrite in legislation approved 13-1 Wednesday in the House Appropriations-Human Services Committee.

Not only was Quinn's proposed human services budget cut by \$1.2 billion, but the committee reordered many of his priorities, reinstating programs that Quinn wanted to eliminate and reducing spending to some programs that he had given increases.

But just because the committee approved the budget with overwhelming numbers is no assurance it will stand as written. It could be rejected on the House floor, rewritten in an anticipated conference committee with a separate Senate appropriations bill or later changed by Quinn. The new fiscal year begins July 1.

Lawmakers grieved over the cuts, which also are about \$750 million below this year's level for human services spending.

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who chairs the committee, began to weep as she spoke of the more than billion dollars cut from the \$12.1 billion in general fund dollars spent on such agencies as the massive Department of Healthcare and Family Services, the Human Rights Commission, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Public Health and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Many of us wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning and wonder who it is we're hurting," Feigenholtz said as she wiped tears from her face.

She said the panel faced "a hideous task" and said she hoped the committee-approved budget is "not a final document."

But she admitted the big-dollar cuts in human services were inevitable.

"I'm often asked why the big cuts in human services?" she said. "But it's like why does a robber rob a bank? Because that's where the money is."

The Republican spokesperson on the committee, Rep. Rosemary Mulligan, R-Park Ridge, was the only "no" vote on the appropriations, saying that she appreciated the work of the committee in rewriting the budget but that "I don't agree with it."

The human service agencies took major cuts, with most travel and telecommunications line items reduced by 50 percent, and most personnel lines frozen at this year's levels. Contractual services were for the most part cut as well.

Perhaps the biggest reduction was an 18.4 percent cut in funding for state-operated developmental centers and mental health facilities. Lawmakers said they wanted to make greater use of community-based facilities. In fact, grant payments to some local programs for the developmentally disabled increase under the House budget.

It also maintains this year's funding level for the circuit breaker property tax grant program that had been wiped out in the Quinn budget. The governor also had proposed eliminating the Illinois Cares Rx program, but House members are suggesting a program about 50 percent of its current size.

Overall, the House committee plan — which could be voted on by the full House as soon as today or Friday — contains more than a billion dollars in cuts for the Department of Healthcare and Family Services and about \$650 million for the Department of Human Services.

But other agencies, including the Department on Aging, the Department of Human Rights and the Department of Public Health get more money next year than this year under the House proposal.

Rep. Keith Farnham, D-Elgin, said the budgeting work was a "grueling process" but "it's much more grueling back home on the streets" with the reductions that are part of an overall bipartisan House plan to balance Quinn's unbalanced budget.

Rep. Chad Hays, R-Catlin, said the budget work would pay off in the long run if lawmakers continued to monitor spending, push for "measurable outcomes" and reprioritize programs.

"It's been a long time since the Legislature was involved in this process in this fashion," Hays said. In other legislative action Wednesday:

— A Senate committee unanimously approved a bill, without debate, that makes a modest change in the controversial General Assembly scholarship program. HB 1353 prohibits a legislator from awarding a scholarship to a relative.

— Another Senate committee approved HB 1748, which requires the Department of Corrections and the Cook County Jail to provide HIV testing of all incoming and outgoing inmates. Prisoners can opt out of the testing, however. Sen. Emil Jones, D-Chicago, said that HIV infection rates in prisons are two to three times the regular rate, and that the testing would let inmates know their status before they are released.