

TASC Public Policy Blog

Feigenholtz, Steans Reshape Illinois Human Services Budget

(Springfield, IL) – Gov. **Pat Quinn** and former Gov. **Jim Edgar** may have different political views, but Quinn is dealing with a similar, but bigger, challenge than Edgar tackled during his tenure as governor.

Edgar faced a nearly \$2 billion deficit in 1991. Quinn assumed office in 2009, inheriting a more than \$13 billion deficit. Edgar left office in 1999 with a \$1.5 billion surplus, crediting his success to raising the temporary tax which later became permanent, cutting state spending and saying “no” to new programs.

“That took time, and it took discipline,” Edgar said. “The governor, I think, has to provide that leadership. It’s hard for the legislature to do that.”

Quinn’s proposed \$35.4 billion spending plan for fiscal year 2012 aggressively slashes the overall human services budget by about \$412 million, or 11 percent, one of the deepest reductions compared to other areas. For instance, the state’s transportation budget saw a 86 percent reduction, or \$67 million, according to Quinn’s proposed agency funding figures.

However, other departments saw state funding increases, including: 3.2 percent, or \$224 million, for the Illinois State Board of Education; 8.9 percent, or \$622 million, for the Department of Healthcare and Family Services; 14.6 percent, or \$163 million, for the Illinois Department of Corrections; 44.6 percent, or \$18 million, for the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

Human services are typically cut first when the state is short on revenue, which is a challenge for nonprofit organizations that depend heavily on state funding to operate their programs, said **Ralph Martire**, executive director of Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, a think-tank that promotes “progressive tax, spending and economic policies,” according to its website.

Kelly Kraft, spokeswoman for Quinn’s Office of Management and Budget, said human services makes up \$23.9 billion, or 46 percent, of the state’s total operating budget, according to Quinn’s spending plan.

“Human services is a big part of the budget, and so when you take a look at places where you need to reduce spending, you have to take a look at some of the places where you have the largest spent,” Kraft said.

“Not everybody has a developmentally disabled adult in their family,” he said. “Not everybody has someone that is suffering from some mental health concerns in their family. Not everybody has somebody with substance abuse. You go down the list.”

State Rep. **Patricia Bellock**, R-Hinsdale, agreed that overall, the human services budget has taken disproportionate cuts compared with other state agencies because it is a big chunk of the state’s budget.

“But that does not mean we should cut services to the most fragile population in Illinois,” Bellock said. “The blind, the disabled, the mentally ill — people who are the reason there is a government is to provide for people who can’t provide for themselves.”

Bellock, who helped to craft the House's human services budget, said committee members were charged with cutting \$1.2 billion in state spending.

The House's plan restores most funding to prescription drug programs Circuit Breaker and Illinois Cares Rx. Quinn proposed eliminating funding for both programs that serve the elderly and disabled. The House voted to trim operational costs by \$181 million.

"We did the other cuts as best we could on travel, on commodities, on personal services, and tried to provide direct services to the people in the state of Illinois who are in need," Bellock said.

But State Rep. **Mary Flowers**, D-Chicago, disagreed with the House's human services budget.

"In good conscience, I cannot sit here after all these years and balance the budget off the backs of the poorest of the poor and the neediest of the needy," Flowers said during floor debate.

State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who was in charge of crafting the House's human services budget, defended the committee's decision to restore several programs Quinn zeroed out and reduce grants by 1 percent across the board.

"Everybody shared pain in the human services budget, everybody," she said. "And that is what we wanted to do. We wanted to first, do no harm; take care of our most vulnerable; cut all the fat and as much admin as we can; and make sure that the people get services. And frankly, we just did the best we could."

Both the House and Senate restored most funding to alcohol and drug prevention and treatment programs, all of which Quinn eliminated. But other programs weren't so lucky. State-operated developmental centers, which are residential programs serving those with developmental disabilities, had funding reduced.

State Sen. **Heather Steans**, D-Chicago, who was in charge of crafting the Senate's human services budget, called the process challenging.

"We were really trying to make sure we were protecting our neediest folks, and make sure we are not balancing budgets on the most vulnerable folks," Steans said. "So that was certainly one of the ways we were going about it. It is always challenging when you have to do reductions. And we clearly we need to be reducing expenses; we have to live within our means."

The Illinois House's total \$33.2 billion operating budget would spend \$12 billion for human services, according to House figures. The state Senate's total \$34.3 billion plan would spend \$14.3 billion on human services, according to figures from Illinois Senate Democrats office. Both figures are lower than the governor's projected budget.

The General Assembly has until May 31 to approve both budgets and send it to the governor for consideration.

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