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Education, social services are big losers in state budget

\$33.2 billion spending plan includes large cuts for both

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SPRINGFIELD — Education and social services are the losers under a state budget lawmakers put the finishing touches on Tuesday.

The \$33.2 billion spending plan is about \$2 billion less than what Democratic [Gov. Pat Quinn](#) wanted. Spending less was on the minds of many lawmakers after they approved a 67 percent increase in the income tax rate in January that was billed as mostly temporary.

"The major cuts are in areas which before we've never cut, social services and the education funds," said Democratic Rep. [Frank Mautino](#), a budget point man from Spring Valley. "But this year, in order to keep with the promise that we would be out of the red and back into the black in four years from the date when we passed our income tax, this is how we had to do it."

Here's a look at some of the changes in the budget plan that was sent to Quinn:

- About \$200 million statewide was cut from education spending compared with this year. The cuts will affect how much in general state aid payments schools get, leave less money for transportation such as buses and slash funding for early education programs.

"It's not something that we necessarily wanted to do, but that's the hand that I was dealt, so to speak," said Rep. Will Davis, D-Homewood, chairman of the House panel overseeing budgets for elementary and high schools. "It's going to be very hard back home."

- [Illinois](#) Cares Rx, a [prescription drug](#) assistance program started under former [Gov. Rod Blagojevich](#), was targeted for elimination by Quinn. Lawmakers approved 50 percent of the current year's funding instead.

That means the benchmark for a family of two to get the coverage will be \$29,140 instead of the current \$36,425. The program is for highly expensive prescription drugs, usually medicine that is injected.

- To cut down on the number of poor people using emergency rooms for minor issues, the state would start charging a co-pay of \$10 — twice the regular rate — for going to emergency rooms for non-emergencies.

Lawmakers also endorsed paying higher rates to hospitals that work with patients to reduce unnecessary readmissions and less to hospitals that allow the costly practice. Saving estimates run as high as \$40 million a year.

- The state would cut in half the amount of interest it offers when it falls behind in paying hospitals, doctors and other health care providers. Instead of 2 percent a month starting after 60 days, the interest rate would be 1 percent starting after 90 days for late payments.

Advocates say those slow payments are the biggest threat to facilities that care for the disabled; those facilities wait months for payments from the state and are often forced to lay off workers or cut services.

•The state would no longer pick up the costs of over-the-counter drugs, such as [allergy](#) medicine, cough syrup or painkillers, prescribed for [Medicaid](#) patients. Lawmakers justified the move, which would save \$16 million a year, because many private insurance plans do not reimburse patients for such purchases.

The budget largely was put together by [House Speaker Michael Madigan](#), D-Chicago, and House Minority Leader [Tom Cross](#), R-Oswego, a plan based on conservative revenue estimates.

The day-to-day spending plan is higher than the current year's \$31.1 billion, officials said, but the state lost significant funding from an expiration of federal stimulus dollars and did not borrow billions of dollars to make its payments to the pension system as it has in recent years.

The effort involved having rank-and-file Democrats and [Republicans](#) sitting across the table and coming to agreements. Senate Democrats had a less focused approach, and they worked separately from Senate Republicans, who argued the budget should be \$5 billion less than the governor proposed.

The House appropriations committee dealing with social services, headed by Rep. [Sara Feigenholtz](#), D-Chicago, managed far-reaching cuts and brought in a budget level even lower than the current year's spending plan of about \$12.3 billion.

"The mission was not to cut any services on people that were disabled or mentally ill or blind," said committee member Rep. Patti Bellock, R-Hinsdale.

As lawmakers passed the budget, Quinn's office issued a statement.

"The governor has been clear since he proposed the budget in February that while we put our fiscal house in order, we must continue to protect core priorities that will benefit the state now and in the future," the administration's statement said.

But Quinn has some political cover as he contemplates what he'll do with the budget lawmakers sent him — he can blame lawmakers for the pain. That's because it's the first time in two years that legislators made the tough decisions instead of pawning them off on Quinn.

"The blame shifts," Mautino said. "I take responsibility for this budget. It is what is there and is an accurate reflection of the money that we have."

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