



## Editorial: Can't pretend Illinois budget cuts won't hurt needy

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No one would confuse Illinois with austere Greece, but signs are afoot that our state government is finally learning to live within its means.

Just hours before the new fiscal year began Friday, Gov. Pat Quinn signed the state budget, a lean spending plan that begins to reflect the state's ability to pay.

Despite passing a major tax increase last year, Illinois still operates deeply in the red. Look no further than \$3.9 billion in unpaid bills owed to schools, human service agencies and municipalities across Illinois. That's expected to reach \$8.3 billion by year's end.

This year, for the first time in recent memory, lawmakers started with revenues and built their budget backward. The goal, obvious but rarely done, is to spend no more than Illinois takes in.

The result is a tough, bad news budget — a budget Illinois needs but one that inflicts much pain.

As the budget process unfolded over the last few months, and it became clear that cuts to human services and education were inevitable, this editorial page felt compelled to keep quiet. We led the way in pushing for a tax increase in Illinois, but it was contingent on simultaneous budget cuts.

When the time for cuts arrived, then, we couldn't retreat.

But we would be remiss if we didn't now point out the price Illinois and its most vulnerable residents must pay.

What follows are a few of this year's budget-cutting casualties:

◆ Education, for the first time in years, took a major hit. General state aid for schools — money that benefits poor districts the most — lost \$152 million. The budget also whacked \$17 million from early childhood program grants.

The loss of early childhood funding means 4,000 additional preschoolers are out of luck this fall. That's on top of 14,000 seats lost in the last two years. Quality preschool is one of the best investments there is, setting kids on a course that keeps them out of prison, off welfare. As adults, they achieve higher earnings than those who didn't go to preschool.

◆ The new budget also continues the long assault on human services. Between 2009 and 2011, support for human services dropped \$300 million. This year, the cut is \$291 million. These are not administrative cuts alone. People in need simply will not be helped.

Mental health services, in particular, have been decimated. The Counseling Center of Lake View, for example, which serves 1,000 mostly low-income Chicagoans, in April terminated a day program for mentally ill older adults, a program one relative of a client credited with “giving me my brother back,” and dramatically scaled back services for children and adolescents. After years of dramatic cuts and late state payments, the center is now expecting another 25 to 30 percent reduction.

“It’s pretty inhumane to tell someone who has finally walked in for treatment — for substance abuse, schizophrenia — that there is no service for you,” said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, whose district includes Lake View and who chairs the appropriations committee dealing with social services.

◆ A last-stop cash assistance fund for adults deemed “unemployable” has been killed. About 9,000 adults, many homeless, were getting \$100 a month, often spent on soap and used clothes. “That’s one of the things that makes this so repugnant,” said Dan Lesser of the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law. “We know these people can’t work and we’re going to deny them.”

The idea, long-term, is to stabilize the state’s finances so Illinois can properly invest in its top priorities over time.

The right goal, of course. But in the meantime, let’s not pretend the needy can wait.